

Turning Shoppers Into Buyers

“The world is full of shoppers,” said the Printing Salesperson. “I have more people asking me for prices than I ever did before.”

“But they aren’t buying. How in the world do I turn these people from shoppers into buyers.”

I hope you’ll take some comfort from the fact that you aren’t alone in this situation. This is something that every salesperson faces

The business world is in a shopping mode, that’s for sure. It’s a familiar refrain among suppliers of all types. Things that were once simply ordered are now very commonly going out for bid. And the arithmetic doesn’t lie...if a print job goes out for three bids, two printers end up losing the job.

But here’s something I find interesting. Printers have been telling me for several years that they were being asked to quote prices on jobs—and with customers—that never required a price in advance before. The printers’ assumption was clearly that those jobs were now being bid out, but I don’t think that was as true two and three years ago as it is today. The reason I don’t think that is because I always followed up with this question: “Are you seeing a corresponding increase in requests for quotes from people you’ve never done business with?” And the answer to that question was always *no*.

Again, it’s a situation where the arithmetic won’t lie. If jobs that never required even one price in advance now require three, there has to be a significant increase in requests for quotations all over town. And that’s what we seem to be seeing today.

Problem And Opportunity

This really indicates two different situations. You might look at one as a potential problem, and the other as an opportunity. The problem is pretty obvious if your current customers are now getting bids on jobs they used to simply order from you.

How do you solve that problem? Well, *solve* is probably the wrong word. I don’t know of any perfect solution that will keep all of your customers with you once they start exploring the possibility of lower prices. Because the chances are pretty good that they’ll find a printer willing to sell whatever it is at a price lower than you’ve been charging.

But the best way I know of to *address* the problem is to meet it head on. Go out to any and every customer who asks you to quote on something for the first time—something that never required a quote before—and say something like this:

“From the fact that you’re asking for a price on this project now, I’m assuming that you want to explore the possibility of reducing the cost of getting it printed somehow. So there are two things I want you to know. First, you shouldn’t be surprised if some other printer offers you a lower price than we do, or a lower price than we’ve been charging you all along. It’s never been our philosophy to be the cheapest printer in town, only the best and most dependable. Secondly, if there’s a need to take some cost out of this project, we should talk about that and see what kind of ideas we come up with.”

What you’re doing here is attempting to minimize the appeal of a lower price from another printer. You’re reminding the customer that there’s been a reason all along that he or she has been buying from you...the most important reason, trust and confidence in your quality and service! You want this person thinking, “Well, I might save a few dollars here by switching printers, but what am I risking?” (This, of course, assumes that you have been delivering quality and service that’s worthy of a premium price. If you haven’t, you have another problem altogether!)

In the second part of your statement, you are reinforcing your expertise, which is another reason for doing business with you instead of some other guy. And I hope you’ll realize that taking some cost out of a job and lowering your prices are two completely different things. Isn’t it true that you can very often apply your *product knowledge* to a situation like this and suggest a better—less costly—way to run the job? A different paper stock, for example, or by eliminating some component that adds significantly to the cost.

It’s been my own experience that exploring options like these often leads the customer right back to the original specs, with the understanding that *this is really what I want, and I now understand that this is what it will cost to be sure that the job will absolutely be done right!*

Shopper Opportunity

Now, how about the people who have added you to their list of printers to get quotes from? How do you turn some of them from shoppers into buyers? I think the first order of business is to build yourself a tracking system that will tell you who these people are, how many quotes they are asking you for, and ultimately allow you a means to keep score in the “quote-and-order” game.

That’s an important consideration because all of this pricing and quoting has a cost involved. If nothing else, it takes time away from anything else you or your employees could be doing. The last thing I want is for you to be pricing out ten jobs a day and never getting any orders back from that effort. If your estimating system doesn’t already provide a means to track outstanding quotes, set up a simple spreadsheet listing the name of the prospect or customer, the date of each quote for that prospect or customer, and the resolution...in other words, did you get the order!

The point of this article is to suggest techniques that will get you some of these jobs, but I want to make this point right here: When it becomes apparent that you’re quoting a lot with a prospect but not getting the work, stop quoting!

Don’t Burn Bridges

Don’t burn any bridges, though, if you can avoid it. As with so many things, there’s a right way and a wrong way to do this. What I recommend is to say something like this:

“We of course want to be your #1 printer for the category of work that we’re best suited for. We’re also willing to be your back-up printer, and have the opportunity to handle at least some of your work. But it’s not a good business decision for us just to be one of three printers you get quotes from, and that seems to be the role you’re using us for. With all due respect, I’d like to ask you to use someone else in that role.”

And as an extra safeguard against alienating a person who still might have value to you someday as a customer, I’d add: *“Do you understand what I mean?”* That gives the person a chance to raise any hurt feelings, and gives you a chance to keep the lines of communication open. I’ve had buyers call me more than once who didn’t buy from me at one place because they were required to buy from the lowest bidder. But they remembered me when they went on to a new job where they didn’t have to work with that limitation.

Three Techniques

The three most important techniques I can suggest to you for turning printing shoppers into buyers are these:

1. Develop a professional looking “proposal package” and use it! I love the idea that you’d create a formal quotation form and place it inside a presentation folder along with any other appropriate information about your company. That might mean copies of testimonial letters from current customers, samples of jobs similar to what you’re quoting on, or perhaps a copy of a document describing your quality control procedures. What you’re trying to do is *differentiate* yourself from the other printers involved in this particular competition.

(By the way, I mentioned a product from Essapac called Laser-Kit in a recent article. I got quite a few phone calls from readers who wanted more information on Essapac’s products. This is a *perfect* application for Laser-Kit, which is an “on-demand” printed presentation folder. You run it through your own laser printer, one at a time, and you could customize your presentation folders to the extent that they could say right on the front: *A Proposal From ABC Printing Company For XYZ Manufacturing Company*. You can call Essapac at 1-800-268-3444.)

2. Deliver your proposals in person whenever possible. Again, you’re looking for ways to differentiate yourself from other printers. Nothing can do that better for you than to get your face in front of the buyer. This also allows you the opportunity to ask a few questions—like *when are you going to make your decision?*—and to ask for the order...more on that in a second!

What if they’re in a hurry and ask for a quote by fax or phone? Give them what they want, but then follow up with “hard copy” in the form of your complete proposal package, either personally delivered or sent through the mail. Please don’t ever be satisfied to call or fax out a quote and let it go at that.

3. Ask for the order! I think just about everyone believes that you can’t say “Thank You” too many times to an existing customer. I’ve also come to believe that you can’t say “I want your business” too many times to a prospect. If three printers send in quotes, but only one takes the time to personally come in and say “I very much want your business,” which printer do you think will have made the best impression.

If the prices are close—and they often are in a bidding situation—it’s the little things that can make the difference. Not with every customer, sure, but certainly with the ones that don’t *have* to buy from the lowest bidder. Here’s the bottom-line question for you to consider: *Are all of these people shopping for the lowest price, or are at least some of them shopping for a printer they’ll feel good about doing business with?*

Numbers Game

This kind of selling—in fact, all kinds of selling—is really a numbers game. You'll never get everyone to buy from you. You'll never have a 100% success rate on quotes and proposals. To tell you the truth, I'd be pretty happy if I got one out of every five print jobs I quoted on in a shopping situation. Sometimes you'll be the one with the lowest price, but that depends on so many factors that there's no way for us to generalize it here. What I hope you'll see is that there are things that you can do to get orders even when you're not the lowest price.

One last piece of advice: When you get started with a new customer after winning a bid, it's reasonable to expect that they'll continue to bid jobs for a while—and that they'll continue to use other printers. It takes more than one job to completely win a new customer's trust.

But there will—hopefully—come a point where you believe that you've earned their trust and confidence, and at that point, you might want to go to the customer and have still another conversation.

"There will always be lower prices," you might say, "but I feel we've shown you that you can depend on us completely for the quality and service you need. And with that in mind, I've come to tell you that I very much want more of your business!"