

Two Common Sales Problems

I spent a full day “out in the field” with a printing salesperson recently, and the experience brought back quite a few memories. I was reminded of my own first months as a salesman, when I “almost” knew what I was doing.

I was also reminded of quite a few very similar days in my career as a sales manager, traveling around a territory with a rookie salesperson, and seeing a few things I liked—and usually at least a few that I didn’t like—in that salesperson’s performance. I wrote once in *QP* that a printing sales manager has to be a combination of teacher, coach, printing expert, parish priest, hero, villain, and mind reader. I felt like I got to practice just about all of those skills in just one day out in the field.

Common Problem

The salesperson I worked with has an awful lot going for her. Her strongest points are a very amiable and outgoing personality, and a very high energy level. She went from call to call to call at a pace that even left me breathing a little bit heavily.

But with all of that, she also displayed a couple of very serious problems that are all too common among young and inexperienced printing salespeople. Common enough that the solutions might be of value to you and your company too.

Problem #1

The first problem facing this young salesperson is that she really doesn’t know much about printing. And that’s not from a lack of trying on the part of the people she works for. They had her training in the shop for nearly three months before sending her out into the field, but she didn’t learn nearly as much as they’d hoped she would.

I think most of the problem was that she didn’t really understand how important product knowledge would be to her selling efforts. She watched, but apparently she didn’t really listen and absorb when technical issues were explained to her. She admits that she was mostly eager to get out of training and into the field—which is not at all uncommon among people who have had some previous sales experience, and not really undesirable in a sales trainee! But it didn’t take very long before her product knowledge deficiencies showed up as a large problem.

Solution #1

The good news here is that this isn’t a difficult problem to solve. It does take time, however, and there’s really no avoiding that. The guiding principle is that this inexperienced salesperson has to learn something from each situation she comes in contact with, and the people she works for—and with—have to help her to absorb what’s important about each individual technical situation.

My first suggestion was to have her return to the shop in the late afternoon each day, to go over any quotes or orders she’d collected with one of two people who handle the bulk of the inside selling/customer service responsibility for the company. As you might imagine, they are two of the most senior and experienced people in the organization. She would work with whichever one of them was best “positioned” to handle the responsibility on that particular day, and they would try to conduct a detailed briefing on at least some part of her day’s activity.

My feeling was that it would prove to be important to take her completely through the process on at least one quote or order every day. After that, the overall operation might be better served if one of those two experienced people went into “do it myself” mode to get all of the rest of her quotes and orders processed. I pointed out that this would require considerable patience from the two senior and experienced employees, but in a situation like this, repetition is almost always the key.

My second suggestion was that the owner participate in this training process by asking one key question at each of the daily, early-morning sales management meetings he holds with this salesperson. The question is a simple one: “What did you learn about printing yesterday?” The answer has to go beyond simple, though. She has to show that she’s making the effort to learn her business and build her product knowledge. And the owner knows that she’ll learn more—and learn faster—if he is successful in tying her daily lessons together into a “big-picture” understanding of printing product knowledge.

Problem #2

This salesperson’s second problem is in many ways an offshoot of Problem #1. Because she lacks product knowledge, she doesn’t yet have much more to say to her prospects and customers than: “Is there anything I can do for you today?”

It's been interesting that, because of her energy and work ethic and the sheer number of people she's been seeing, she has brought some orders in with this limited selling technique. But we want to get her to the next level, so we have to give her more to say!

Solution #2

The solution to this problem is to provide a young salesperson with a basis to have real "selling conversations" with customers and prospects, to get beyond the limits of that easily deflected question: "Is there anything I can do for you today?"

As I pointed out to this particular salesperson, when you ask that question, there can only be three possible responses. One is for the customer or prospect to say "yes" and give you an order. Another is for that person to say no, because there truly is nothing pending. The third is for that person to say no, because he or she has some objection to giving you an order.

I saw all three of those things happening during my day working with this salesperson. Picking up an order like we did at a law office was a victory. Hearing that nothing was pending at another office was a "tie" (if it was true...if it wasn't, there had to be an objection present, right?) Being told "no...there's nothing you can do for me today" in a few places—when the salesperson assured me that she knew that there were print projects being handed out—represented a couple of flat-out losses.

What any salesperson has to do in order to really succeed in the long term—to win rather than lose—is find out what the objections are and see if they can be made to go away! So here's what I suggested. Rather than asking if there's anything she could do for people on her next calls, I asked her to see if she could start a different conversation. I suggested four related avenues to pursue:

1. Who (else) are you buying from, and what is there that you particularly like about doing business with that company?
2. Who (else) are you buying from, and is there anything that you *don't* particularly like about doing business with that company?
3. Is there anything you particularly like about buying printing as part of your overall responsibilities?
4. Is there anything you *don't* particularly like about buying printing as part of your overall responsibilities?

Hooks

Ask questions like these, I suggested, but don't attempt to deal with the answers on that call. The answers people will give you will provide you with "hooks" for the next few calls. Let's say that someone tells you that they like a certain printer because they're prompt with quotes, and because they're always on time with their deliveries. They dislike doing business with that printer just a little bit because the salesperson is sometimes hard to reach on the phone.

Those answers could give a salesperson something to talk about on his or her next three sales calls!

Next Call: Instead of just asking if there's "something I can do for you today, I suggested trying this..." "You know, I've been thinking about what you told me last time about how you really like doing business with XYZ Printing because they're prompt with quotes. Did you know that it's our policy to get quotes back within 24 hours, unless our customer needs them back sooner? One of my other customers is AAA Company, and they say that one of the things they like about *me* is how fast I get quotes back to them? Would you be interested in calling Jane Doe over there for a testimonial? Here, let me leave you her number." And then you leave!

Call After That: "You know, I kept thinking about something else you said to me a couple of weeks ago. You said that you really like doing business with XYZ Printing because they're always on time with deliveries. That's something we keep track of in our own production department, and I'll stack our on-time record up against anybody's. If you're interested, I can give you a few phone numbers of customers who will back that up. By the way, did you call Jane Doe over at AAA Company and ask her about me? (If not...) I really hope you will. I know you like doing business with XYZ Printing, but there really might be ways that I can serve you better." And again, then you leave!

Call After That: "As you might imagine, you're on my mind a lot. We really want your business, and I keep thinking about the things you've told me you like about XYZ Printing. I'm so confident that we can do those things at least as well! But I've also been thinking about that one thing you told me sometimes bothers you about doing business with them...that the salesperson is sometimes difficult to reach on the phone. Well, let me tell you two things...first of all, I wear this beeper (pull it out and show it) and when you call the office, they'll call me, and I'll respond. You can count on that! Because I want to earn and keep your business! The other thing is that as we get a relationship going between your company and our company, you won't even *need* me to make things happen on a job. When you tell them who's calling, you're going to have someone ask you 'is there something I can do for you right now, or do you need to talk to your salesperson about something in particular.' Now really, if you're not getting that kind of service

from XYZ Printing, isn't it time to give me a try?" Now it would be appropriate to ask..."Is there anything I can do for you today!"

Real World?

Now maybe a "real-world" situation won't play out exactly this way, but I hope you'll get the idea. Printing salespeople often need to *create* more to talk about—especially young and inexperienced ones—and even highly experienced salespeople sometimes need to *create* situations that will allow them to make the points they want to make. (And everyone should remember that it's not enough just to say it! There has to be proof! That's why I suggest mentioning the other customers, and almost *challenging* a prospect to call them as references and for testimonials.)

I really hope that my young sales student will apply her personality and exemplary work ethic to these challenges of taking "the next step" as a printing salesperson. If she will, I predict a great deal of success for her. And if you have a salesperson who has similar problems—or if you *are* a salesperson with similar problems—I hope I've given you some idea of how to take that next step.