

Use The Summer Months To Improve Your Business

The “dog days” of summer are coming, and for many quick/digital/small commercial printers, summer is a season for slacking off. For some, that’s a voluntary process—and I’m all for taking some time off in the summertime, or whenever your slow months occur, especially if you’re running a strong and profitable business. For others, unfortunately, a summer slowdown is completely involuntary, and it produces a serious strain on many printers’ cash flow.

I’ve written before about strategies for avoiding a summer slump, and that’s mostly a matter of increasing your sales and marketing activity in the winter and the spring. One of the unfortunate truths in this business is that seasonality flows downhill. In other words, the reason many printers experience a slowdown in the summertime is simply that their customers slow down. If that’s your situation, your best chance of being busier through the summer is to take some business away from your competitors in the months leading up to your slow period!

It may be too late to accomplish much of that for the summer of 2005, but it’s not too late to make an effort. I strongly recommend that you turn up the heat on your sales and marketing activities as the outside temperature rises. Most of the printing industry seems to cut back on sales and marketing expense as things slow down, so you have a good chance of being more visible in your marketplace by marketing aggressively over the next couple of months.

Internal Improvements

You can also use the summer months to improve your overall sales and customer service practices and procedures. During the busiest months, many quick/digital/small commercial printers are simply scrambling to keep up. The things that grow a printing business tend to fall through the cracks during the busy season, and that includes both sales/marketing and training activities. (That’s another reason why printers experience ups and downs, or course. It’s not all seasonality, sometimes the slow periods are self-induced!)

Here’s an idea for an eight-week series of meetings with your sales/customer service staff, a combination of training and the development of better sales and customer service practices and procedures. I hope you’ll see how meeting for perhaps an hour each week through the summer months can provide pretty significant internal improvement.

Week One: Basic Issues/Policy & Procedures — I see this first session as an outline of policy and procedures regarding sales and customer service employees, everything from your hours of operation to policy on lunch breaks, coffee breaks, vacation and sick days, specific authorities and responsibilities, etc. This is an opportunity to spell out exactly how you want the sales/customer service department to operate, and it’s been my experience that many of the problems present in printing companies grow out of a lack of understanding in these areas.

Week Two: Defining Good Customers — There’s more to being a good customer than lots of sales volume, and no one knows better than the salespeople and CSR’s how difficult certain customers can be. I’d start this session by listing the qualifying criteria for good customers (easy to deal with, pay your prices, pay their bills, send good files, etc.). As a “homework” assignment to this session, I’d ask each salesperson/CSR to rate each of the customers they work with on a 1-10 scale, with 10 being a great customer and 1 being a lousy customer.

Week Three: Changing Bad Customer Behavior — Using the “homework” as a foundation, I see this session as being about the problems certain customers create, and everyone brainstorming solutions. I would expect there to be two or three things about many customers that cause problems, and you can set both strategy and measurable goals for addressing each problem. For example, you might come up with an idea to change the behavior of a customer who always calls at the last minute, and set a goal of turning them from a 2 in this category to a 5 within 3 months, and up to a 7 within 6 months.

Week Four: Avoiding Quoting And Order Entry Mistakes — I’m convinced that at least 90% of all the quality and service problems that occur in the printing industry originate at the point where the specs of a job are being transferred from the customer to the printer, and that can involve the customer, the salesperson, and/or the CSR. This session should be a discussion of the common problems and how to avoid them. The “end product” of this session might be a checklist for getting all of the specs right.

Week Five: Quoting And Follow-Up Strategy — I think it's important to follow-up on every quote, if for no other reason than sometimes all it takes to get the order is to ask for the order! In addition, it's important to know why you're losing quotes, and to recognize who you're winning a high share or a low share with. This session should be about follow-up policy, procedure, and technique.

Week Six: How To Deliver Bad News — Bad news flows in both directions in the printing industry. Sometimes it's a salesperson or CSR having to call a customer to tell them about a problem. Other times it's the salesperson or CSR having to tell the owner about a problem. I see this as a session where you use several recent problems as "food for thought" and talk about how they might have been handled better.

Week Seven: Proactive Customer Service — Industry research indicates that a large percentage of customers who switch printers never call to complain, they just stop placing orders. This session should set guidelines for staying in touch with all customers at appropriate intervals. The "prework" for this session could be a listing of an appropriate interval for each customer—two weeks, four weeks, eight weeks, etc. In other words, at what point should we get nervous and call these people if they haven't called us.

Week Eight: What Have We Learned, And Where Do We Go From Here — I see this session as a summary of the previous 7 weeks, to make sure that everyone "got it." I like to ask everyone this question at the end of a seminar: "What's the most important you learned here today?" In this application, you might expand that to ask: "What are the two or three most important things we've talked about over the last 7 weeks, and what have you done to change your approach to the job?"

Silver Bullet

It's been said that education is the "silver bullet" in our society, and that's every bit as true in business. The more training and education you provide, the more likely it is that you'll see the performance you're hoping for from your employees.

Hopefully I've provided you with at least a starting point today that will help you to use the summer months more productively in your business!