

Was It Murder Or Suicide?

One of my favorite authors is Lawrence Block. He writes detective-type novels for the most part, including a series of books about a recovering alcoholic ex-cop named Matt Scudder. One of the recurring characters in this series is Scudder's Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor, a quick printer, of all things, named Jim Faber.

Block must know something about quick printing. I've had more than a few of my clients and friends in the business tell me that owning a quick printing business can drive you to drink!

In addition to the Scudder books, Block has also written a series of short stories about a character named Keller, which he recently published in a single volume called "Hit Man." The title reflects Keller's occupation. Every once in a while, he gets a phone call from a "mystery man" in White Plains, NY, after which he gets on an airplane, flies somewhere, and kills someone.

In the first story in this book, Keller flies to Portland, OR where his target is a former accountant who testified a few years earlier against a shady client, then went into the government's witness protection program. In his new life, this former accountant is, you guessed it, a quick printer. In the story, he and his wife run a shop called Quik Print in Roseburg, OR.

"It's a franchise kind of thing, a turnkey operation," the accountant says of his new business. "Anybody could learn it in twenty minutes." (Maybe Block doesn't know so much about quick printing after all!)

The story takes a few twists and turns, and for a while it looks like Keller is going to show mercy to this poor soul (who some would say has already been punished enough for the mistakes he's made. He is, after all, struggling to make a living as a quick printer.) But in the end, the hit man does what he was hired to do, and another quick printer bites the dust.

As I finished the story, I had sort of a weird thought. Here's this professional hit man who is paid to kill a man who happens to be a quick printer. In real life, that might not have been necessary, especially considering the number of quick printers who seem to be pretty intent on killing themselves.

Figuratively Not Literally

Now, I don't mean that literally. But I have to tell you that I see and hear about an incredible number of instances where quick printers do things—or don't do things—that make me think that they have to be at least professionally suicidal.

Here's an example. A quick printer had a \$40,000 a year customer. The body of work from that customer was a quick printer's dream...one and two-color, 8 ½" x 11" and 11" x 17" formats, reasonable turnaround times, and artwork that really was camera-ready. Then the customer said: "We'd like to start sending you our orders electronically, either on disks, or better still, over the Internet."

The quick printer responded: "I'm not sure I want to get involved in that. From everything I've seen, it just doesn't work very well. From where I sit, the way we do business isn't broken, so we shouldn't try to fix it."

For two or three weeks, the orders from that customer continued to come in on a normal and regular basis. The quick printer congratulated himself on the way he'd handled the situation. Then the orders stopped cold.

I guess two or three weeks is a pretty reasonable timeframe for a customer to find a new printer who *will* do things the way he/she wants them done.

Another Example

Another quick printer had a customer of about the same size. Actually, this customer had averaged \$2500-\$3000 per month for several years, and done almost \$40,000 in business from January to September of last year. Then the flow of orders slowed over a period of 5-6 weeks, and then stopped altogether in November.

This quick printer called me during the last week in February of this year. "I'm having a problem with my biggest customer," she said, "and I hope you can help me with it." She then told me what I've just told you.

"What have they said to you about the reasons for this lack of orders?" I asked.

"Well," she said, "I haven't actually talked to them yet, but that's what I've been thinking of doing. Do you think it's a good idea?"

I could only answer that it would have been a better idea back in November or December when she first became aware of the situation.

One More Horror Story

Another quick printer hired an outside salesperson not too long ago. It was a very rapid process. He ran an ad in the paper, called the first respondent in for an interview, talked to her for no more than half an hour, and then offered her the job. He's told me since that he didn't see that he was taking much of a risk, since this salesperson was going to be paid on straight commission.

I asked him if he'd really been able to find someone who'd take a sales job with no guaranteed income, at least in the beginning. "Oh," he said, "I didn't ask her to do that. I told her that I'd pay her \$2000 a month for the first three months, but by then she'd have to be earning her keep through what she sold." He was offering a straight 10% commission, which meant that this salesperson would have to be bringing in \$20,000 in business by her fourth month in order to stay at that \$2000/month level. He was also committing to \$6000 in payroll expense over three months, which certainly seems like a risk to me.

This horror story isn't over yet. There was no training; either product knowledge or selling strategy and technique. On reporting for work on her first day, the salesperson asked: "What should I do first?" The quick printer said: "Hell, I don't know. Get out there and sell something. You're the one who's supposed to know how to do it."

As I write this, the third month of this "experiment" is coming to an end. Total sales through nearly three months: approximately \$5,000. Total cost: the entire \$6,000. The quick printer's current plan: "Well, she's going on the 10% straight commission now, just like I told her in the beginning. I probably should have fired her back in January when I first felt that she wasn't going to make it, but I figure she'll quit before the next month is over anyway."

Scare Tactics

Still another quick printer came up to me before a seminar recently and told me that she always enjoys the "change your ways or die" articles in *Quick Printing*. It's not that she personally needs all of the "dire warnings" we columnists provide, she said, she just enjoys reading about how stupid some of her competitors are. She told me that she figures that our "scare tactics" probably work on some people, but that most quick printers are smarter—and better business operators—than we give them credit for.

I asked her: "How's business?" She told me that business was OK, just a little bit down from last year. She told me that the entire area was down, but she had hopes that things would pick up toward the middle of the year. In the meantime, she said, they were finding that they had to be "very sharp" on pricing just to hold their own.

I spoke with several other attendees during the break and after the seminar. Each of them told me that business was great. In fact, one told me that her sales volume was almost 35% ahead of the same period last year. I mentioned that I'd been told that the entire area's economy was down. "Oh no," she said. "I haven't heard anything like that, and we're certainly not seeing it in our shop. In fact, we've even been thinking about raising our prices in a couple of areas, because we think demand is a little bit higher than supply right now."

I think many quick printers are smarter—and better business operators—than many of the articles in *Quick Printing* might seem to give them credit for. In fact, I think one of these two particular women is very smart about the way she runs her business. Can you guess which one?

Two Groups

I do know that there are many very intelligent, capable, and successful quick printers out there. And even though we may not always seem to recognize that in our writing, I'm pretty certain that all of us who write for *QP* feel pretty much the same way.

I've been told by readers that we seem to be divided into two categories, one group which tends to write exclusively about taking advantage of positive situations, and another which tends to stray into these "change your ways or die" columns. I think that's a fair observation, but let me offer another one. I think there are also two categories of readers of our magazine: the ones who live in blissful ignorance or outright denial, and the ones who call or write John Stewart, Tom Crouser and Bob Hall and say "When were you in my printshop? I don't recall seeing you here, but that sure sounded like me you were writing about!" It strikes me that most of the intelligent, capable and successful quick printers will fall into the second category.

Real Purpose

That takes me to the real purpose of this particular column. If you have a sense that you're doing—or not doing—something that might cause (or already be causing) real problems for your business, the last thing you should do is to just sit on those problems. Business problems sometimes get better on their own, but more often they get worse.

The first thing you should do is simply think about the problem, and consider possible solutions. If you're having trouble finding the time to do this, make the time to do it. You might be surprised at how creative you can be when you take—or make—the time to actually think out your problems. (I've also seen a few people in this situation

enjoy the pleasant surprise of having their own basic common sense reappear, once they were able to strip away some of the distractions caused by the problems themselves.)

What if you take or make the time to think, but you can't come up with a solution? If that's your situation, I'd think next about bringing in a "hit man" of your own. There's a lot of talent available to help you "kill" any business problem you might be facing. If you're part of a franchise, call the "home office" and ask for help. Franchise or independent, a phone call, fax or e-mail will put you in touch with John Stewart or Tom Crouser. If you've got computer problems, call John Giles. If you're confused about where this industry is going, call Bob Hall. And lest you think I'm sexist, there are at least a few "hit women" who can help you solve your problems too. Several of them work in Tom Crouser's organization, including Tom's wife Pamela.

Last month, I put in a plug for my own consulting services. You might think I'm plugging the other guys now because I feel guilty about that. If you think that, you'd be wrong (even though I have heard some comments on the appropriateness of consultants "plugging" themselves in these columns.)

The fact of the matter is that many quick printers need help, and much of what they need goes far beyond what can be covered in magazine articles. Many quick printers need help solving operational or personnel or competitive problems. Some quick printers are themselves the problem!

The bottom line is this...if you need help, get help! We don't want to be asking if it was murder or suicide after learning that another quick printer has bitten the dust.