

What Do You Sell?

A Printing Salesman walks into a bar...

He takes a seat at the corner of the bar itself. There are four other customers, two to his right, and two to his left, across the angle. The bartender says: "What'll you have?"

"Schlitz draft," the Printing Salesman says, and the bartender shuffles over to the tap to draw the beer.

"You look like a salesman," says the customer farthest across the angle. "What do you sell?"

"Printing," says the Printing Salesman.

"That's interesting," says the customer. "So, can you believe the Pats got beat by those miserable Jets?"

Bar Scene: Take 2

A Printing Salesman walks into a bar...

He takes a seat at the corner of the bar itself, with the same four other customers. The bartender says: "What'll you have?"

"Schlitz draft," the Printing Salesman says, and the bartender shuffles over to the tap to draw the beer.

"You look like a salesman," says the customer farthest across the angle. "What do you sell?"

"Well, that's a good question. Do you want the short answer, or can I give you the longer answer?" says the Printing Salesman.

"That's an interesting way of starting a conversation," says the customer. "I got nowhere in particular to be, so let's hear he long answer."

"OK, to start with, I work for Superfast Printing and Graphics, right here in town. Do you know where we are, over on Green Street?"

"Yes, right next to Curly's Barber Shop, right?"

"Exactly, we've been there for almost 30 years, and we've grown a lot over the years, but let me come back to that in a second. Obviously, working for a printing and graphics company, I sell printing and graphics, but that's really broad. I sell everything from basic business printing—like letterhead, envelopes, business cards and business forms—to marketing materials like flyers, brochures, postcards and catalogs. I sell a lot of what we call book work—employee manuals, technical manuals, instruction books and booklets—and lately I've been selling a lot of large-format graphics. That includes posters and banners and window clings and even vehicle wraps. Do you need me to explain about window clings and vehicle wraps?"

"No, I know what you're talking about. My wife works in a flower shop. They have signs in the windows, and their delivery van is all decorated up, though I always thought that was paint."

"It could be paint, but more commonly today it's printed. It's really cool technology. By the way, don't let me leave here without asking you the name of the flower shop. I told you, though, that we've been in business for almost 30 years, and that we've grown a lot over the years. We started as a quick printshop, where you could literally wait while we printed up simple orders, or made copies from whatever sort of originals you might bring in. Now we're much more of a full-service, commercial printing company. We're still pretty quick, but we can do a lot more than the quick printing and copy shops of the 80's and 90's. The large format printing is an example, and we can even help you with what we call marketing services—not just printing the marketing pieces, but actually helping you to develop very sophisticated cross-media marketing campaigns, using direct mail, e-mail and all kinds of other media to get your message across. We can even build you an interactive website to be part of all of that.

Hey, please forgive me if that was more of an answer than you wanted. I get pretty wound up about what we can do and what I can sell."

"No worries," said the customer. "So, can you believe the Pats got beat by those miserable Jets?"

Bar Scene: Later On

"OK, fellas, it was good to meet you. I guess we'll have to wait until next year with the Pats, but I know it's gonna be a good year for us with the Red Sox. Oh, hey, I wanted to ask you the name of the flower shop your wife works at. Would she be involved in ordering any of those graphics they put in the windows or on the van? And while we're at it, are any of you guys involved with the printing or graphics where you work, or could you give me the names of the people I should talk to? If you could—and if you could arrange to say something nice about me to them—I'd really appreciate it!"

The Morals Of The Story

It was not my intention today to glorify a Printing Salesman who spends time in bars, or to moralize against him. The real morals of this story are that most salespeople do a poor job of explaining what they sell—what prospects and/or customers could be/should be buying from them—and that most salespeople also do a poor job of networking. Starting with the networking issue, the development of new customers can start at any time or any place. It doesn't have to be a "networking event" like a Chamber or BNI meeting. Some of the best connections I've ever made began in purely social circumstances.

A piece of advice, though: Don't push too hard in a social setting. You don't have to! Exchange phone numbers and/or e-mail addresses, which will allow you to connect again. All you really need to learn in the social setting is whether a person might be of value to you, either as a direct prospect, an influencer, or a referral/introduction source.

Now moving on to the explanation of what you sell, most of the "elevator speeches" I hear need a lot of work. I've written before that most printing buyers are *civilians*—my term for people who don't have professional knowledge of the printing industry. If all you say is that you sell *printing*, you're leaving it up to them to define your product line. Would they know that *printing* in the 21st Century includes posters and banners and window clings and vehicle wraps? For that matter, would they know that your product line goes beyond letterhead, envelopes and business cards to include catalogs, books and manuals—and that your capabilities go way beyond that to include marketing services? Would they have any idea how much different the quick printer of today is from the industry's pioneers?

Here's another piece of advice: If there's anything you want people to know—about your products, your services, your own personal experience, your company's history—you've got to tell them! Don't leave it up to them to decide what they could be/should be buying from you.

And remember too that you can't just *tell*. The best selling is an *interrogatory* process. I've written on that topic before, and I almost certainly will again.