

What Does A Salesperson Do?

During 1997, I spent about sixty days “in the field” with clients’ salespeople, providing sales training and sales management support. I estimate that I made close to 1000 cold calls with these salespeople, and went in with them on 100-150 pre-set appointments.

I also went along with them to pick up artwork or copy originals, deliver proofs, pick up proofs, pick up paper, drop off notepads, pick up ink, pick up donuts, drop off bagels, pick up candy, drop off samples, pick up business card orders from business card wholesalers, pick up die-cut folders and brochures from binderies, pick up imprinted hats and t-shirts from screen printers, pick up disks from customers, drop unreadable disks off at service bureaus, pick those same disks up at service bureaus, return disks to customers, deliver finished orders ranging from one small box to 25 heavy cartons, and one day, I even went along with a salesperson to pick up his boss’s cat at the vet’s office.

The topic for today is whether all of these activities really belong in a salesperson’s job description.

Important Decision

When you make the decision to send a salesperson out into the marketplace, you have another very important decision to make: Do you want this salesperson to focus on selling, or do you want him/her to be responsible for other aspects of the operation of your printing company?

Before I go any farther, let me make it clear that you can make either choice. There are plenty of people in the quick printing industry who wear multiple hats, including the outside sales hat. In fact, a “part time” salesperson—part sales and part other operational function(s)—may be the best way for many quick printing companies to approach outside sales. The economics are quite a bit different between funding a full-time salesperson and allocating 10-15 hours each week of a “fixed” employee’s cost to sales activities.

But that’s really not what I’m getting at when I present the choice between “selling” and “other aspects.” The question I really want you to think about is whether the job description definition of “selling” should really include such things as picking up artwork, estimating, order entry, order tracking, making deliveries, or any of the other activities I mentioned earlier.

Again, this is an area where you have a choice. You can decide that, in your company, the salesperson will do some—or all—of these things. But you can’t escape the reality that these activities take time, and any time taken away from prospecting and the ongoing development of new customers and new business is likely to limit the amount of sales volume a salesperson will bring in.

Two Components/Two Approaches

From a sales and marketing perspective, the key to success in any business has two components: *customer development* and *customer satisfaction*. The first challenge is to gain customers; the second challenge is to keep them!

In the printing business, you can take this understanding a step further by recognizing that a printing company faces two ongoing challenges: creating and maintaining customer relationships and handling the jobs each customer sends your way.

If you look at the printing industry as a whole, you will find two basic approaches to meeting these challenges. In some companies, the salesperson is responsible for the relationship, but someone else manages the individual print jobs. In other printing companies, the salesperson is responsible for both the relationship and the jobs themselves.

Which approach is better? I can tell you that the first approach is pretty much standard in the “big press” world, where most salespeople are supported by inside sales/customer service personnel. The salespeople are responsible for the overall customer relationship, while the inside sales/customer service people handle the individual print jobs. In quick printing, a salesperson typically has a much greater operational involvement in individual print jobs. (That’s not always by design, though...more on that in a moment.)

Now, does the fact that the “big press” companies do it one way mean that their way is better? Now necessarily, because the ultimate issue here is profit, and the “outside-supported-by-inside” approach has to cover the cost of both the outside people and the inside people. If a salesperson can manage the relationship and the jobs, it’s likely to cost less.

The break point between the two approaches is productivity. A salesperson with inside support dedicated to managing his/her customers’ print jobs should have more time available to sell...to develop new customers and new

business. And the bottom line is that if that's what you really want—or need!—your salespeople to do, it doesn't make very much sense to burden them with other responsibilities.

By Design?

As I noted earlier, a quick printing salesperson's involvement in operational details isn't always by design...at least not by conscious design. One of the most common complaints I'm asked to deal with is the salesperson who sticks his/her nose into the production process when it's not needed or wanted. Over the years, I've learned to recognize this complaint as a symptom of bad management, not necessarily a bad salesperson.

Just last week, a new client told me that his salesperson was driving his production people crazy by "mothering" every one of her jobs. Of course, I later found out that he expects her to price every order, write up the job jacket, explain anything tricky to the production people, handle all communications with the customer, and then deliver the job after it's produced. I also learned that this client doesn't hold daily production meetings. To me, the message being sent to that salesperson is pretty clear...you are expected to take full responsibility for your jobs! If I were her, I think I'd be inclined to "mother" my jobs too.

That's not to say that this situation is always completely the owners fault. I've also seen plenty of salespeople who would simply rather stay inside the shop and protract their "victories" than go out into the harsh, cold marketplace—where most of a salesperson's prospecting and relationship-building efforts end in failure. Again, though, this comes back to bad management. No sane person enjoys rejection, and most of us will avoid it if we can. The sales management challenge is to reinforce the understanding that rejection is part the job, and to motivate the salesperson to push through a mass of rejection in order to get to the relatively small number of "victories" that is necessary for success.

Distraction Or Solid Selling Strategy?

Think back on that long list of "selling" activities at the beginning of this article. Most of them will fit into one of two categories: distractions or solid selling strategy. I hope you'll agree that sending a salesperson to pick up your cat at the vet's office is a distraction from your salesperson's real job!

I have written and spoken before about the difference between management and leadership. I've expressed the opinion that any idiot can be a manager; that's just a matter of having the authority to tell people what to do. The most successful managers, though, are leaders as well. They lead by example and show people what to do. And they don't send conflicting signals. For example: "Don't waste time. Don't hang around the shop. Get out there and make more sales calls. But before you do that, go pick up my cat!"

OK, that's an extreme example, but how about this one: "Don't waste time. Don't hang around the shop. You need to increase your sales volume, so get out there and make more sales calls. And also make this delivery and go by the paper merchant and make this pickup."

It's bad enough when a manager sends a conflicting message, now add in these two considerations of human nature—the wish to avoid rejection and the predilection of most people to take the easier course of action in any situation where there's a choice. While we're at it, let's also consider that most quick printers are hiring salespeople at the low end of the pay scale, many of them young people who really don't yet have a handle on how hard they'll have to work to truly succeed.

What I'm really trying to say is that when you put all of this together—and then tell a salesperson that making deliveries is part of the job—the chances are pretty good that making deliveries will become as important as prospecting and customer development in the salesperson's mind. It won't be a surprise to me if that salesperson isn't bringing in the sales volume you expect.

Now, some of you may be thinking that there can be a "selling value" in making deliveries. I won't argue that point, because I too have been in situations where it seemed like a very good idea for a salesperson to make a particular delivery. My general rule of thumb is that if it making a delivery helps to cement a relationship, it's a reflection of solid selling strategy.

If it's not a necessary step in building or cementing a relationship, though, it's nothing more than a distraction and a waste of selling time. Let's cut to the chase here. What do you want a salesperson to be doing, making deliveries—and/or performing other "courier" functions—or prospecting and building relationships that will result in a constant flow of new business?

Salespeople And Estimating

While we're on this subject, I have a particular prejudice against having an outside salesperson do his/her own estimating. First of all, it's another load factor on the salesperson's time. But probably more importantly, this strategy can be very much like letting the fox guard the henhouse. Think about it, an outside salesperson runs into

more expressions of price sensitivity than anyone else in a printing company. In my experience, it's a rare week when a hard-working salesperson *isn't* told at least once or twice that he/she lost a bid because of price!

In order to be a truly profitable contributor to your business, a salesperson has to learn how to overcome price objections, and also how to find people who don't object to your prices in the first place. Unless you've managed to hire a very rare salesperson, putting pricing in his/her hands is likely to take away some of the urgency to develop those skills. After all, which is easier, overcoming price objections or quoting lower and lower prices in response to the objections you hear?

I think it's a mistake to make a salesperson responsible for both sales volume and profitability. A far better strategy is to make the salesperson responsible for sales volume alone, and ensure the profitability of what he/she sells by putting pricing in the hands of someone who can properly be held responsible for profitability...like a trained estimator, a manager, or the owner!

Closing Thoughts

Here are a few closing thoughts on the matter of defining a salesperson's job responsibilities. Thought Number 1: You *do* get to decide how your salespeople will operate. But if you expect them to do the "sales support" things, you can't expect them to get to the same sales volume levels as "full time" salespeople.

Thought Number 2: The lower you go on the pay scale—and the experience scale—the more likely it is that a salesperson will become distracted easily. If you don't want them doing the "sales support" things, make that very clear in the hiring and training stages, and reinforce the message every time you see them getting distracted.

Thought Number 3: If you've found someone who can sell, let that person sell! Don't dilute a potential superstar's performance by asking him/her to do "courier" and "sales support" work. True selling—which I define as the ability to prospect, qualify, and convince—is a rare skill in the quick printing industry. If you've found someone who has it, please don't waste it!

A Closing Story

I had mixed emotions about starting this article the way I did. Part of me hopes that you'll read it and think: "*I didn't know Fellman did on-site consulting like that. I'll have to call him and see what he can do for me.*" Another part of me hopes that you won't call. Why? Because this kind of work can be dangerous!

During the course of the sixty days I spent with salespeople last year, I was involved in two automobile accidents—both caused by my "students"—and scared by their driving more times than I care to count. I ended up doing the driving myself on three different occasions; twice when my students locked their keys in their cars, and once when I looked at the tires on the car a salesperson was planning on driving me around in. I was also thrown out of an office building in Atlanta by an angry man with a gun.

I guess the bottom line is that I am hoping you'll call, but don't be surprised if I mention hazard pay when we talk about the cost!