

You Have To PUSH For Increased Sales

Most quick/digital/small commercial printing salespeople don't push hard enough for business. Their relationships with prospects and customers are driven almost exclusively by those prospects or customers. In other words, the salespeople wait for the decision-makers to make their decisions.

That's not to say that we don't have salespeople who are pretty diligent about following up on quotes and proposals. In fact, we have salespeople who follow up on quotes to the point of being obnoxious! But there's a significant difference between following up on a quote and asking for the order, and an even more significant difference between asking for an order and dealing with the problems or objections that might lead to a "no" decision.

I think we need to teach salespeople how to push harder; how to identify and deal with those problems and objections. Because, as I tell my sales coaching clients, the decision about whether to buy from you is far too important to just leave it up to them!

A "Follow-Up" Story

Here's a story that I think represents an all-too-common scenario. A printing salesperson we'll call Mary identified a "suspect" we'll call ABC Company. As part of her first conversation with the Purchasing Manager, Mary learned that ABC Company was "thinking about" developing a pocket folder and a number of two-color inserts describing their products and services. Mary offered to quote on the project, and within a few days got back to the Purchasing Manager with prices on 1000, 2000 and 5000 complete sets of the folder and 10 inserts.

That happened in January. In April, I was in Mary's area presenting a couple of seminars at a trade show, and the owner of the printshop hired me to come in and spend a day with her. One of the appointments Mary set up for that day was with ABC Company, and as we drove up to their building, I asked her to tell me about the company and what she had going with them. I learned about the quote, and that Mary had been calling on the phone every two weeks or so to follow up on this project. Paul, the Purchasing Manager had been telling her that the project was "on hold."

Paul came out to the lobby to meet us, and after we got the "polite pleasantries" out of the way, Mary asked: "So Paul, where are we with the pocket folder and the inserts?"

"Well, Mary," he answered. "That project is still on hold. I won't have anything to tell you until the marketing people tell me what they want to do."

"OK," Mary said. "Well, I'll check back with you in a couple of weeks." Then she looked at me. "Did you have anything that you wanted to ask Paul about?"

"I sure do," I said. "Paul, in the three or four months since Mary first started talking to you about this pocket folder project, how many other orders have you placed with the printers you do business with?"

"Oh, probably ten or twelve," he said.

"Mary," I said, "how many of those projects did you know about?"

The answer, of course, was none. Mary had been so busy following up on her quote that it never occurred to her to try to broaden the relationship, either by learning more about Paul or about his company's printing needs.

To me, this is a perfect example of the difference between "chasing" a job and building a relationship. And that's a very common failing among quick/digital/small commercial printing salespeople.

Better Strategy

As I told Mary, it would have been much better strategy to switch gears after her first couple of follow-up calls on Paul. "OK," she could have said, "since it looks like this one isn't going to happen right away, there are two other things I'd like to start exploring with you. The second of those is to ask you what other printing projects you're working on. Before we get to that, though, can you tell me this. If Marketing was ready to go with the pocket folder project, would I be getting the order?"

If the answer was "yes," Mary could start feeling pretty good about her relationship with Paul and his company. She could then move on to a discussion of what else Paul was working on with pretty high confidence. But what if the answer was "no"?

The situation a salesperson is in when that happens is pretty straightforward. Any time you ask for the order and the answer isn't "yes," you have encountered an objection. And when that happens, you have only two choices. One is to find out what the objection is, and deal with it if you can. The other is to ignore the objection and hope it will go away.

Interestingly, that second strategy usually works. Unfortunately, the way it works is that the prospect's interest in doing business with you goes away too, and that's hardly a desirable outcome! Finding out what the problem is at least gives you a chance to remove it.

Here's what I tell my sales coaching clients. When you ask a "commitment question," there are only two possible answers—"yes" or "no." But let's look at "no" a little differently. Instead of treating it as a "no, I'm never going to business with you" situation, let's look at it as a simple statement that your counterpart has some problem with saying "yes" to you today. When you look at it that way, the salesperson's next question is pretty straightforward—"What is it that's keeping you from saying 'yes' to me today?" The answer to that question will tell you what you have to do to overcome the objection, and while I can't guarantee that you'll always be able to do it, I can tell you that knowing is a lot better than not knowing!

This may seem to be coming out of left field, but I have long believed that every printing salesperson should make the "Nick News" show on the Nickelodeon Network a "must watch" every Sunday night. The show is hosted by Linda Ellerbee, and it might best be described as "60 Minutes" done in 30 minutes and targeted at pre-teen and early-teen kids. The thing that's relevant to printing salespeople is that Ms. Ellerbee has given her show sort of a motto, and that motto is "If you want to know, ask!"

I think that's a great thing to be teaching kids at that pre-teen/early-teen age, and I think it's also a great thing to be teaching printing salespeople. In fact, I might even add something to the lesson for printing salespeople, because for them, it's not simply a matter of wanting to know, it's really a matter of needing to know! Because a great deal of time and energy gets wasted every day by salespeople who are just sort of "wishing and hoping" that things are going well in the relationships they're trying to build. And for the owner/employer, that means money is being wasted too!

Trial Closes

In sales training jargon, what I'm talking about here is a "trial close" strategy. The basic idea is that you stop at certain parts of the selling process to ask: "How am I doing so far?" And if you're not doing well, you stop and address the "objections" before going any farther.

I had a chance to demonstrate this strategy on another recent on-site visit. I was out on a first face-to-face prospect appointment with Bob, the owner of the printing company—an owner, by the way, who has tried unsuccessfully a couple of times to hire a salesperson, and finally decided that he has to do the selling himself. We "pre-briefed" his strategy for this appointment pretty intensely in the car on the way over, and he was armed with a "cheat-sheet" of the questions he wanted to ask. With all of that giving him confidence, I thought he did a pretty good job of learning about the prospect, and identifying both her printing needs and some opportunity to displace one of the printers she was currently using.

Of course, what I thought was not really important. It's what she thought that really mattered, isn't it? So since we wanted/needed to know what she thought, I asked.

"Please tell me," I said, as my client came to the end of his planned conversation, "what do you think of Bob so far? Do you feel that he knows what he's talking about? Do you feel like you can trust him to do a better job than that other printer has been doing for you?"

Her answer was that she felt pretty good about Bob based on what she'd seen and heard so far, but she was nowhere near ready to make a decision to give him an order. "I understand," I said. "I think Bob and I both understand that we've only taken the first step here. So what should our second step be?" We talked about that for a while, and then I asked one more question as we were packing up to leave. "Do you think that I was too pushy with the questions I asked you about how we were doing and what to do next?"

"Not at all," she said. "In fact, I wish more salespeople would ask me what I'm really thinking. I think that would probably save most of them a lot of time, especially the ones I'm never going to buy from!"

That's a key point, because you can't sell to everyone. Sometimes the objections are simply insurmountable. (For example, when the only thing that will get them to buy from you are prices at which you won't make any money!) It's a good thing when a salesperson disqualifies a non-prospect rather than wasting any further time on him/her.

When you couple that with the way relationships tend to develop faster when someone pushes them along, I hope you'll see that teaching your salespeople to push at least a little bit harder is a good thing too.

A Closing Thought

Here's a closing thought for today. It is definitely possible to push too hard, and there is a line that you don't want your salespeople to cross. As I tell my sales coaching clients, though, that line is quite a bit farther out there than most salespeople think. You can almost certainly push a little harder than you have been, I tell them, and the only thing that will happen is that you'll get better results.

By the way, their experience has shown that I'm right!