

The Rhythm Method

One of the highlights of the January issue of *QP* for me was Bob Hall's interview with Richard Azera, the president of Copy 2000. I've spent a little time with Richard at the last two Industry Leadership Conferences, and he's a very interesting guy.

He made one comment in the interview that really struck me. On the subject of US companies franchising in Europe, Richard said that, in order to succeed, these US companies "are going to have to have a different type of rhythm—take a more patient view and a longer term approach." In the interview, Richard was talking specifically about selling franchises. But I think his comment also describes why many individual quick printers are getting less than desirable results from their efforts at outside selling. You have to have a certain rhythm to be successful at outside selling. And success will never come if you don't give selling enough of a chance.

A Longer View

One of the basic principles of my *PRINTSELLING* seminar is that you've got to take a longer view of the selling process. It might be even more correct to say that you've got to take a longer view of the buying process. You should never forget that people buy for their own reasons, not for yours. And that means that they buy on their own timetable, not on yours. The idea that you can go out on a cold call and come back with an order is pretty ridiculous in your business. Oh, it happens, but when it happens it is very definitely an exception to the rule.

The idea that you can schedule a first appointment with a prospect and come back with an order is almost equally ridiculous. It's more likely to happen if this prospect somehow reached out to you, maybe responding to a mailing or your yellow pages ad and asking you to come by and talk about a project. But it very rarely happens when you're talking about raw prospecting. By that I mean the situation where you identify someone that *you* want to see, and then you arrange an appointment.

Getting To Six

You shouldn't expect to sell anything on your first contact with a prospect. Or, to restate that, you shouldn't expect anyone to buy from you that first time out. The decision to buy printing is based more on factors of relationship than any other factors, and relationships take time to build. They take time and both quantity and quality of contact.

(I can hear some of you now saying that price is all anybody cares about these days. If you really believe that, you probably shouldn't bother reading any more of this article. In fact, if you really believe that, you probably ought to put down the magazine down and put your business up for sale. You've got a better chance of getting out of it with a few bucks that way than you do by trying to sell quick printing on price alone.)

Quantity and *quality* of contact are intertwined in a number of ways. Let's start with quantity. For years, I've been quoting a statistic from the American Sales Association that states that only 1% of all things that get sold are sold on the first sales call.

The statistic goes on to say that only 2% of all things that get sold are sold on the second sales call, 3% on the third, 4% on the fourth, 8% on the fifth, and the remaining 82% of all things that get sold are sold on the sixth sales call or beyond.

Do I believe that these statistics are exact? No, not exact. But I very much believe in the underlying principle. You've got to build a relationship before you're going to start getting printing orders. You may have to build some recognition before you'll even get the chance to do the serious convincing. When you look at it that way, I hope you realize that the real challenge in your outside selling is to *get to six!*

Quality Of Contact

Here's where quality comes in. If what you have to say isn't interesting and well presented, you'll never get in enough contact to bring that prospect around. It's an delicate situation. Each one of your contacts with a prospect—particularly the early ones—has to stand on it's own in terms of interest and value to the prospect and it has to leave you with something still to say.

Most quick printers—if they're out selling at all—are going about it in exactly the wrong way. I think most quick printers would consider it a very good day if they went out on cold calls and got to make two or three presentations. I think the *worst* thing that can happen to you on a cold call is to get in to see the decision maker and *have* to make your presentation.

Think about it! You're only at *one* and you've fired off your main guns. You're unlikely to have convinced the prospect to buy from you, and what are you going to do next?

You might get another chance to come in and talk face-to-face, but you're still a long way from six. About all you have left is to call on the phone every week or so and ask, "Have you got anything for me?" That's not real selling, and it often turns into nagging. And that's not any way to run your sales effort.

A System Of Selling

I teach a system of selling in the *PRINTSELLING* seminar that is based on a longer view of the printing buyer's decision-making process. I lay out the actual sequence of contact, and it starts with a cold call. But my goal on a cold call is not to make presentations, it's to learn something and leave something. What you learn, what you leave, and especially what you do next are the keys to the system's success.

I don't want to give the whole seminar away, but I'm willing to talk a little bit more today about rhythm. Rhythm is a factor in your contact with customers, and it's also a factor in how you manage your own sales efforts.

You have to make the time to sell. Quick printers are always telling me that they can't find the time to get out and sell, and I tell them that part of their problem is that they're using the wrong word. Forget about finding time, make a decision to make time.

I think you'll find the best results if you make the same time each week. Get into a rhythm! Every Tuesday morning you're out of the shop making cold calls. *Every Tuesday morning!* Every Monday morning you sit down with the telephone to make appointments with some of the prospects you uncovered on the previous Tuesday's cold calls. On the first Friday of every month, you sit down and plan a mailing that will go out on the third Friday of that month and bring you leads to follow up on for the following month.

Rhythm may be the key to consistency, and consistency is very definitely the key to success in selling.

Contact Rhythm

You get to define your own sales effort rhythm, but I think you'll find it best to let your prospects have a hand in determining the contact rhythm. That is, at least, after the first few steps in the process. Those you can make happen pretty quickly, and pretty much within your complete control.

But if you accept the fact that each prospect is going to make his or her own decision, for his or her own reasons, I think you have to accept them making the decision according their own timetable too. Many times, after the first couple of steps, your challenge is to stay in contact without becoming a pain in the butt.

That can be tricky. How do you know what is enough and what is too much? I've always found that the best way is to ask my prospects. It's a simple question, really. "What's the best way for me to keep this relationship moving forward without being a pain in the butt?"

If they tell you to call in a month, that's what you do. If they tell you to put them on your mailing list and call in the spring, then that's what you do. If they ask you to drop in from time to time, you say "If I come by in three weeks, is that what you had in mind? Or were you thinking more like six weeks?"

Business Rhythm

The last element of rhythm is this: You can't really control when individual people are going to make the decision to buy from you. But you want to control your business. You at least want a regular flow of business coming in, and you probably want to see consistent growth as well.

What you need to establish this rhythm and keep it going is a large enough number of prospects in the decision-making process. You need to have enough people somewhere in the process of deciding to become your customers.

One of the great failings of all too many printing companies is that they make themselves cyclical by working hard at building business for a while, then slacking off when things start going pretty well. They break up a good rhythm, and eventually they pay for it when they lose customers without having replacements in the pipeline somewhere. Every printer loses customers along the way. That's right up there with death and taxes among the absolute certainties of life.

The Bottom Line

The bottom line is that good sales relationships take time to build. And good is the operative word here. Because we're not just talking about building sales. We're talking about building profitable sales, with customers who are likely to stay with us a long time. I've always valued the ones who were hard to convince, because that means it's not going to be easy for anyone to convince them to leave me. Of course, keeping those customers is not automatic. There's a whole customer service and ongoing contact rhythm that will have to be maintained too.

But that's another article for another issue. Thank you, Richard Azera, for the comment that got this one started.