Critical Selling Skills

A couple of months ago, I wrote about the Printing Sales Knowledge Base—product knowledge, market knowledge, operational knowledge and selling knowledge. It takes solid knowledge in each of these four categories to be successful as a printing salesperson, and the best way to ensure that knowledge is to evaluate each salesperson according to each category and then train accordingly. To put that another way, the best recipe for success with outside sales is to hire people with fundamental strengths and then train away their weaknesses.

What are those fundamental strengths? Obviously, some product knowledge, market knowledge, operational knowledge and/or selling knowledge would qualify, but the chances of finding high levels of all four categories in a person that the typical quick/small commercial printer can afford to hire are pretty slim. At a more basic level, I look for people with intelligence, a competitive nature, and an appreciation of the finer things in life. (Three Things To Look For In A Salesperson, *QP*, April 2002. If you don't save back issues of *QP*, you can find this article in the archives at my website: www.davefellman.com. By the way, I'm going to write more about how much salesperson a typical quick/small commercial printer can afford next month!)

I've always been a believer in breaking big things down into their component parts, and solving big problems one piece at a time. For example, if your problem is an underachieving salesperson, the solution starts with identifying the root cause(s) of poor performance, and that could be the lack of product knowledge, market knowledge, operational knowledge and/or selling knowledge. Once you know what's missing, you can put together a training plan and (hopefully) eliminate those weaknesses one by one.

Selling Skills

In keeping with that strategy of breaking big things down into their component parts, I always look at "selling knowledge" as a combination of two distinct knowledge/skill requirements: *organizational skills* and *convincing skills.* As I wrote earlier, you might think of the "division of labor" here in this way; the challenge of identifying and qualifying prospects is about 80% organizational skills and 20% convincing skills, and the challenge of turning prospects into customers is about 80%/20% the other way.

What should you learn from those percentages? I think the most important lesson is that organizational skills are more important to printing salespeople than convincing skills! Let's do the arithmetic. Salesperson A is well organized, but lacking in convincing skills. Salesperson B is strong in convincing skills, but poorly organized. Over the same timeframe, Salesperson A will get in front of 80 prospects while Salesperson B will get in front of 20. Salesperson A will "convert" 2 out of 10 of those prospects, yielding 16 new customers. Salesperson B will convert 8 out of 10 of those prospects, also yielding 16 new customers.

OK, so far we have exactly the same result, but here's the difference. Salesperson A will almost certainly improve his/her convincing skills just through experience. Salesperson B will continue at the same level. With a modest improvement in convincing skills, a hard-working, well-organized Salesperson A could realistically be expected to convince 20 or more of his/her *next* 80 prospects to become customers.

Please note, by the way, that I don't expect anyone to turn 8 out of 10 "suspects" into customers. I specifically used the term "prospect" here, and by my definition, a prospect is a person who buys exactly the kind of printing you specialize in, buys enough of it to make pursuit worthwhile, *and* shows some interest in buying from you. It might take 10-15 suspect evaluations to come up with a real prospect, but that just makes organizational skills even more important!

Motivation & Attitude

The foundation of organizational skill is motivation and attitude. In other words, you have to want to be organized. For some people, it's simply part of their personality to want to be organized. For others, organization has to be a means to an end (for example, a way to gain some of those "finer things in life" I mentioned earlier.) This is something I stress very early in the relationship with my sales coaching clients. In fact, just yesterday I delivered this flat pronouncement to one of them: "If you want to reach your goals, you have to develop better organizational skills. It's as simple as that!"

Now, developing organizational skills and using organizational tools are not quite the same thing. Here's an example. This particular salesperson uses ACT as his contact management tool, but he told me about a situation yesterday where he missed out on an opportunity to talk with a solid prospect because he scheduled two appointments too close together in terms of time and too far apart in terms of distance. His first meeting ran longer

than expected, and by the time he got to the second location, his prospect had left for a meeting of his own. Managing time and distance is a critical *skill*, and it's a skill that can be taught. ACT and other contact management programs are certainly important tools, but like all computer applications, they operate by GIGO— garbage in, garbage out!

In addition to teaching organizational skills, I stress the idea of "front-loading" the most critical activities. Let's say that we establish an "action standard" of 20 suspect evaluations each week for a salesperson. On average, that's 4 per day, but "on average" in the wrong way to approach this situation. I'd rather see that salesperson schedule 12 of those calls on Monday and the rest on Tuesday, and then no matter what sort of craziness might happen during the rest of the week, the action standard for suspect evaluations will have been met. Taking this a step further, I like to see salespeople schedule their suspect evaluations for early in the day. That way, if something comes up to interrupt or displace that activity, there's still plenty of time in the day—or in the week—to get caught up.

It's a pretty basic concept, isn't it? Don't leave the important stuff to the last minute!

Convincing Skills

The bottom line on convincing skills is another 80%/20% situation—80% of convincing comes from asking the right questions. That's how you learn what to say in the remaining 20%, the "here's why you should buy from me" conversation. Most printing salespeople have that completely backwards. They can't wait to make a "presentation" and show their samples, and hopefully leave with something to quote on. I hope you'll see the flaws in that strategy, and start thinking about a better organized sales process in addition to better organization/time management.

Here's a closing thought. You can make some money in sales with either organizational skills or convincing skills. It's tough, though, to make *lots* of money without high levels of both.