

Decision Makers -- And Other Players

It is well accepted that a salesperson has to be able to get to a decision-maker in order to succeed. It is also very plain that many print salespeople have problems doing that. Now, there is no question that many obstacles are present, both human and technological, but I think the larger problem is that many salespeople apply most of their selling efforts to “other” players. My goal for today is to help you to better understand the players and the process.

Gatekeepers and Money-Spenders

A “gatekeeper” can be defined as a person who controls access to a decision-maker. Secretaries, receptionists and assistants fall into this category. I would like you to consider, though, that human gatekeepers are far less powerful than they used to be. When I last had a secretary, she opened all of my mail, and very little “sales mail” got through. It is uncommon today for a gatekeeper to screen e-mail, even for senior executives. We have filters for that, a technological obstacle.

Having said that, many print salespeople still attempt to chat-up these gatekeepers, in the expectation that a secretary, receptionist or assistant can influence the decision-maker. Does it ever work? Sure. But let me come back to that.

First, we should talk about situations where a secretary, receptionist or assistant is actually placing print orders. This is not uncommon, but you must understand that a gatekeeper who also places orders is not usually the decision-maker. More often, he or she is what I call the “money-spender.” That term describes a person who is authorized to collect quotes and place orders, but who may not be authorized or even motivated to change suppliers.

Think about that. If this gatekeeper is already your customer, that is one thing. But if you are on the outside looking in, it is a much different story. Setting aside the authorization issue, it has been my experience that typical money-spenders are averse to change. That is good when you are on the inside, but bad when you are not. When a decision-maker’s approval is required, you have to get that from the decision-maker!

Positive/Negative Influencers

If you find yourself in that situation, the gatekeeper role becomes more important than the money-spender role. The “sale” you must make is to gain whatever positive influence the money-spender has. At the very least: “I would like to give this new printer a try.” Even better still: “I would like for you to talk to this new printer. I think they have a lot to offer us.”

Be aware, though, that a gatekeeper/money-spender may have limited influence or limited ability to champion your cause. And remember that you are the professional salesperson in this situation. It is usually bad strategy to leave it up to an influencer to make the sale for you.

It would be better strategy to attempt to “sell” the gatekeeper on opening the gate, in other words, to give that person good reasons to help you connect with the decision-maker. If you are talking to a person who cannot make the decision to buy from you, you simply have to get to the person who can.

Be aware, too, that there can be negative influencers in the mix. Consider this situation one of my clients faced recently. The gatekeeper/money-spender seemed happy to go to bat for her, and in fact, set up a meeting. When my client called the day before to confirm, she was told that the decision-maker – a Marketing Director – had invited the purchasing manager to sit in, and that the purchasing manager had told him that it would be a very bad idea to change. “I am comfortable with our print supplier,” he had said. “Let’s not mess with something that’s working.”

Final Thought

OK, in this case, the strategy did not work, but there is a lesson to be learned. Purchasing agents are sometimes decision-makers, but not always. Very often they are money-spenders with capacity for negative influence. That is especially true when a salesperson is trying to sell a company on making changes to the way they do something, for example, adding personalized direct mail to their marketing mix. That sale has to be made to the marketing manager, not a purchasing agent whose main goal is likely to be finding the lowest price.

You cannot always get to the decision-maker, or the influencers, that is true. But you must always try!