

A Feminist Perspective On Printing Sales

I can imagine the reaction of many readers upon seeing the title of this month's column. "Fellman must be interviewing a woman to come up with a feminist perspective on printing sales." Nope, didn't need to do that, because I am, in fact, a feminist. I became one on June 12, 1985, the day my daughter was born.

Like many men of my era, I didn't have a whole lot of interest in "women's issues" until I had a tiny one of my own to care about. It was pretty amazing how my perspective changed, and how important things like equal opportunity and equal pay have become. And from my perspective, the quick/small commercial segment of the printing industry—especially the sales side of the business—is a pretty good place for women to be in the early 21st Century.

Customers and Salespeople

We don't have any formal research that I know of to support this idea, but I think it's pretty widely accepted that the majority of quick/small commercial printing buyers are women. It may not be true that the majority of ultimate decision-makers are women, but the people who place the orders certainly tend to be. The people who take the orders also tend to be women—a group which includes both salespeople and customer service employees.

In the "big press" world, there's still much more of a bias toward men in the sales role and women in the customer service role. Happily, in the quick/small commercial segment that bias isn't as strong. In fact, there might be a bias *toward* women in the sales role, for two good reasons and one bad one.

The first good reason is that the majority of buyers seem to be women. The second good reason is that women tend to be less ego-driven and more empathetic than men. The bad reason is that women are often more "affordable" than men—in other words, their compensation requirements are often lower, allowing a printer to hire "more woman for the money." From an employer's perspective, of course, that's not a bad thing, but it still offends my feminist sensibilities.

Two Good Reasons

The "two good reasons" are very much interrelated, but I may have to take you off on a little tangent to understand why. That tangent is the idea that most people hate salespeople. In truth, I don't think "hate" is the emotion most people feel toward salespeople, I think it's *fear!* They're afraid that some slick-talking salesperson will push them into making a bad decision!

Men may have less of that fear—or we may hide it better!—but the greater empathy of women tends to make this less of a problem in the first place. If both men and women are less afraid of female salespeople—and if women are more prevalent on the buying side of the equation—that's a pretty strong argument for women in the selling role!

I realize that what I'm about to say next might seem discriminatory, but I want you to read it carefully. *If all other qualifications are equal*, I would choose a woman over a man for a quick/small commercial printing sales job every time. Will all other qualifications ever be equal? Probably not. But I do believe that a "typical" female has an advantage over a "typical" male in doing this particular job.

Ego Drive vs. Empathy

In my seminars, I draw a distinction between the two most critical elements of selling skill—organizational skills and convincing skills. I draw a further distinction between convincing skills and a convincing attitude. In other words, there's a difference between having the ability to bring someone around to your way of thinking and having a burning desire to do so. That burning desire is often referred to as "ego drive," and it's one of the characteristics that sales suitability profiles such as Caliper are designed to measure. Empathy—defined as the ability to identify with and understand another person's feelings or difficulties—is another of those characteristics. (You can learn more about Caliper and the importance of pre-hire testing in "Starting Smart Into Outside Sales," my free 40-page guide to hiring, training, managing and motivating quick/small commercial printing salespeople, which is available on the downloads page at my website—www.davefellman.com.)

For most employers, the perfect sales candidate would possess both strong empathy and a strong ego drive. Unfortunately, perfect candidates have proven to be relatively few and far between, especially at the lower ranges of the compensation scale, where most quick/small commercial printers typically look for sales candidates. What you generally get is a choice, either empathy or ego drive, and my observation is that most of the high empathy/low ego drive candidates seem to be women, while most of the low empathy/high ego drive candidates seem to be men.

So the question is, which is more important? My answer is that I've had lots of success teaching high empathy/low ego drive salespeople to be more *assertive*. In other words, I've been able to develop their convincing skills even

without a strong convincing attitude, just by giving them the confidence to ask the right questions and press a little harder for answers.

To put that another way, I've observed that the ego-driven "need" to convince sometimes gets in the way of a relationship sale. The real artists in printing sales identify pain and problems and offer pain and problem relief. Along with that, they force their prospects and customers to consider that they do have pain and problems—that's where the assertiveness comes in! The end result is that, with guidance from the salesperson, the prospects and customers ultimately convince themselves!

One of my coaches back in high school had a favorite saying, that there's no one tougher than a tough gentleman. He was trying to teach us that we could be both good citizens and successful competitors. I think there's a very direct application of that philosophy to today's discussion. In selling, there's no one better positioned for success than an assertive empath.

While I'm on the subject of athletic competition, you may remember something I wrote in a column titled "Three Things To Look For In A Salesperson." (QP, April 2002) The three most important characteristics of sales success, I wrote, are intelligence, a competitive nature, and an appreciation of the finer things in life. I mentioned that I like candidates who've had athletic experience, because that shows evidence of a competitive nature.

Here's something I didn't write in that column, but which bears consideration. The most important thing I've learned in my own considerable athletic experience is how to lose. That may sound strange, but it's true. I never learned to like to lose, but I learned from my losses, and I applied those lessons, and over the years, I've won my share of games and contests and selling situations.

It occurs to me that the printing industry owes a special debt of gratitude to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the federal statute which requires gender equity in school sports. As a result of Title IX, young women have had a lot more opportunity to learn the lessons that competitive athletics can provide, and I think that all by itself has created a better pool of potential printing salespeople.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

As I mentioned earlier, I don't think "hate" is the emotion most people feel toward salespeople, but it's certainly true that the sales profession lacks respect in our society. Yes, the serious and talented salespeople gain the respect of both their customers and prospects and their employers, but that respect has to be earned...and then some!

By that, I mean it's not enough to wait and hope for respect. Serious and talented salespeople *demand* respect, in both obvious and sometimes not-so-obvious ways. Here's an "obvious" example. One of my sales coaching clients told me a story last week about a customer who's gotten more than 60 days behind on his account, and has promised payment several times without coming through. "Fred," this salesperson said, "I think I've worked pretty hard to earn your business, and you know that I've done a lot of things over the years that have made you look good. Right now, you're making me look bad. I don't want to go back to my boss again and make a promise that you're not going to keep, so how about taking care of this *today*." He left with a check—and with very high confidence that he'll continue to be the primary printer for this customer. "Sometimes, you've just got to explain the rules," my client told me. "It's a respect thing."

Please note the masculine pronoun. Yes, this was one of my male clients, but is there any reason why a female salesperson couldn't have handled this situation the same way? Male or female, it's still a "respect thing"—and respect is not a function of gender unless we let it be.

Here's a not-so-obvious example of demanding respect. I teach all of my sales coaching clients to use both their first and last names and their company name when introducing themselves or leaving messages. I put special emphasis on this point for my female clients, though, because I don't want them doing *anything* that might diminish the perception of their professionalism. With established customers, I tell them, it might be OK to be "Sally from Superior," but with anyone you're not very well established with, I want you to be "Sally Smith from Superior Printing & Graphics."

This may seem like a small thing, but as I've written before, the small things in selling strategy and technique often make a big difference.

The Sex Thing

Here's some very important advice for women in printing sales, especially young women: Never flirt! You may think it's harmless, but I've seen and heard of far too many situations where "innocent" flirting led to serious problems, ranging from stress in important customer relationships to sexual harassment complaints. That's not to say that a salesperson can't enter into a romantic relationship with a customer or prospect—although there is some business risk in those situations too. What I'm talking about here is any suggestion that sex might be traded for business.

Within just the last few months, I've had three of my sales coaching clients tell me that the reason they weren't getting any business from a particular prospect was that the buyer was sleeping with a salesperson from another printing company. True? Who knows. Talked about? Certainly! Just yesterday, one of the guys I play basketball with was telling a story about a salesperson who's been calling on him. "I'm pretty sure I can nail her if I give her the order," he said. (That story, by the way, was my motivation for writing this column. And I apologize if the explicit language offends anyone, but that's exactly what he said.)

I tell my female sales coaching clients—and my daughter!—to keep as much distance as possible between themselves and any dangerous or compromising situation. Flirting might be fun, and it may seem harmless, but it doesn't belong in a professional's business behavior!

By the way, I tell all my young male sales coaching clients exactly the same thing!

Final Thoughts

Here's one more piece of advice I give to my female coaching clients. In many cities, there are "Women In Sales" clubs or networking groups, and if there is one in your area, I would encourage you to check in out. I have mixed emotions about the value of networking groups in general—I'll write about that soon, in fact—but I've also observed that some of these women-only groups work pretty well. For women who own printing firms, you should also consider the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO). *QP* Columnist/Industry Consultant Debra Thompson has been active with NAWBO for many years, both as a member and as a speaker to NAWBO Chapters across the country.

Speaking of Debra, as I write this, she's in the early stages of planning both a Women in Leadership event for the 2004 PrintImage International Owners Conference, and a Women's Conference in Tucson, AZ sometime in the Spring of 2005. In you'd like to learn more, e-mail debra@tgassociates.com.