

Image Studies

I've mentioned a type of market research called an *image study* a couple of times in recent articles, and I promised that I'd devote some attention to a more complete discussion of what an image study is, and what it can do for you. As the name suggests, an image study can tell you something about how you are *perceived* by your customers and/or prospects.

Perceived is a key word. As many printers have learned the hard way, *what is* isn't always *what's seen* by customers and prospects. You can provide what you think is very good quality, exceptional service, and an impressive list of equipment and capabilities, but if the people you're selling to don't *perceive* those things, you don't really have them as performing assets.

Competitive Comparison

An image study can be designed to consider a company on its own, or in comparison to other printing companies. That's probably where the greatest value is for most printers, because among other things, a comparative study can be more-or-less anonymous. I say more-or-less, because most people—if asked to compare a group of companies of the same basic type—will realize that one of those companies is probably the originator of the survey. But, since no one needs to know *exactly* which company is conducting the survey, the relative anonymity stands to give you acceptably unbiased results.

If I were putting together an image study for your company, I'd ask you to give me the names of four or five of the companies you view as competition. The basic structure of the study would be to ask the people who receive it to rate each company—or at least each company they are familiar with—against a common list of performance factors, such as quality, service, pricing/value, capabilities, etc.

What you'll end up with is a measure of where you stand in terms of each of the competitive factors. In all likelihood, you'll end up with sort of a matrix of information that tells you that you're perceived as better than some of your competitors in some areas, and lagging behind some in other areas. One competitor might be viewed as better than you at quality, but behind you in service or capabilities.

What you stand to gain is a clearer understanding of what your competitive strengths and weaknesses are, as perceived and reported by the people whose opinion most matters...the people you're either selling to now, or want to sell to.

Interesting Results

What's been interesting to me is how often something in the findings of an image study comes as a complete and shocking surprise to the managers of a company. We all have our own opinions of what we're good at, and not so good at. It can be pretty shocking when the market tells you that your assumptions and opinions are wrong.

I've had more than one manager tell me that the information gained from the survey just had to be wrong. "We have very good quality...or service...or equipment," these managers have said. "The problem is that the people you surveyed just don't realize it!"

The smart manager won't fight with the findings, but will try to understand them. And above all, the smart manager will find ways to capitalize on the strengths identified, and ways to shore up the weaknesses. The research is worthless if you don't learn from it, and if you don't act on what you learn.

Rating The Factors

Something you should consider in analyzing the data from an image study is the relative importance of the factors on which you're asking people to rate you. For example, you might learn that you're considered to be the best equipped printer in town, but what good does that do you if being well-equipped is not an important factor in the typical buyer's decision making process?

In most of the image studies I've been involved with, we asked those being surveyed to rate the importance of each of the factors they were going to be asked to consider, before we asked them to compare companies in terms of those factors. The hierarchy of importance placed on quality, service, price, and other factors is often an eye-opener to printers. In fact, I use a compilation of information gained that way as an exercise in the opening segment of the *PRINTSELLING* Seminar. The exercise is titled "Why Do They Buy From The Printer They Buy From?"

Share The Knowledge Gained

The last advice I'll offer you on the subject of image studies is to share the knowledge you gain with your employees. Remember that what you learn from your customers and prospects represents the reality of their perceptions. If the reality of what they perceive is not to your expectations—or to your liking—get to work to change it.

In all probability, you're going to need help from your employees to do that, and my experience is that you're likely to get that help if you show them the "why" behind the changes that will be required.