

A Part-Time Approach To Outside Selling Makes A Lot Of Sense!

All of the evidence indicates that outside sales fails more often than it succeeds for quick/digital/small commercial printing companies. The evidence also indicates, though, that having someone out there competing for new business—and keeping you in the competition for your established business!—is a critical key to your success, right now and in the future.

On one hand, it's hard to make it work, but on the other hand, you *have to* make it work. Oh yeah, don't you love being in between the rock and the hard place?

One Key Reason

It's been said that the best way to come up with a good solution is to really understand the problem. OK then, why is outside sales so difficult for so many quick printers to master? The answer, as I've written before, has three parts: first, hiring people who aren't suited to the job in the first place; second, poor training/management/support; and third, the simple fact that the economics of hiring salespeople work against so many quick printers. To put that another way, many printers—especially those in the \$500,000 per year and below category—just can't afford the investment in a really high-quality candidate. Or to put it still another way, you can hire \$50,000 people for \$50,000 a year, but when all you can invest is \$25,000, you're probably going to end up with a \$25,000 person.

Here's another way to look at this situation. For the most attractive candidates—like those \$50,000 people—taking a selling job working for a budget-constrained quick/digital/small commercial printer would almost certainly be a step down. So what we have to do is find high-quality people for whom the job would be a step up.

You know who I'm talking about here? Maybe your best current employee!

Known Quantities

The nice thing about your current employees is that they're largely known quantities. That doesn't necessarily mean that they're all superstars, but at least you know something about their strengths and weaknesses.

Do you have one or more people on your staff right now who fit this profile? Bright, loyal, solid work habits, cleans up reasonably well, underpaid? Leave that last one alone for a moment and consider this...if you give me someone with those first four characteristics, I can teach that person how to sell basic business printing and copying services. Far more often than not, anyway. Those characteristics and good training and effective management are really all it takes!

Now let's talk about being underpaid. The issue you have to be concerned with is not how well someone is being paid for the job he/she does right now. The real issue in today's marketplace is how well someone is paid when considering his/her potential. It's hard to find and keep good people, right? Part of the reason for that is that good people tend to go looking for even better jobs. If you have good people now, you may very well have to provide them with better jobs in order to keep them!

The formal term for what I'm talking about here is "career path." I remember my first part-time job in a restaurant. I started out at the very bottom of the ladder, washing pots and pans and cleaning up after the cooks. The next step on my career path was washing dishes (a better job, believe it or not!) From there, a bright, loyal and hard-working dishwasher who cleaned up reasonably well could become a busboy, and a busboy could eventually become a waiter—where the big money first started to appear!

In quick printing, it's generally fair to say that there are two opportunities to make "big" money. (For the sake of this discussion, let's define that as earning more than \$50,000 per year.) One is to own the business—although it's been proven that owning a printshop contains no "big" money guarantees—and the other is in selling. For most "good" people, that would put a selling job up toward the top of the career ladder.

Money Isn't Everything

Money isn't the only motivator, of course, and studies have shown that appreciation on one hand and challenging work on the other are of equal importance to many people in today's workforce. It seems to me, though, that an opportunity to earn more money while doing very challenging work and gaining the appreciation of both your employer and your customers would be considered a multi-win proposition by many people. And that's what you have to offer when you place a selling job at the top of the career path in your printshop.

OK, now let's come back to reality. Selling has a stigma attached to it. In fact, there are a number of negative perceptions attached to selling in the printing industry. Salespeople in general are widely considered to be lower life-

forms, and from what I can see, most of the non-sales people in the printing industry consider printing salespeople to be the worst of all!

I had much the same opinion of salespeople when I was younger. And in fact, my first selling job did nothing to alter my opinion of most salespeople. My first career was in restaurants, beginning with that potwasher job while I was in high school, and continuing in several more kitchens and dining rooms as I worked my way through college. After graduation, my career path took me from a management trainee job to a couple of assistant manager slots and ultimately to the lofty position of general manager of what was arguably the best restaurant in Buffalo, NY. From there, I moved on to an even bigger restaurant in New Jersey which burned down one Sunday morning under moderately suspicious circumstances, and that made it seem like a good time to get out of the restaurant manager business. So I moved back to Massachusetts and took a job selling restaurant equipment, working for incredibly sleazy people in an incredibly sleazy industry. Yep, I thought, this is what sales is all about.

I didn't last very long at that job. But I did get lucky with my next attempt at selling. With some help from my father, I got a job with Moore Business Forms, where I learned a lot in a hurry about honest, consultive, value-oriented, win-win selling. I learned that selling can be an honorable profession, and I also learned that you can make a pretty good living doing it the right way!

Sell The Job!

OK, here's where I think we are in this discussion. I think you probably have at least one pretty good sales candidate working for you right now, but it might very well be a person who has no current interest in a career in sales—possibly because of the stigma(s) attached to selling, but also possibly because of a lack of real knowledge about the job and what it would entail and what it would take to be successful. What you probably need to do is sell the job to this person!

If that were my challenge, I'd start the process by asking about the person's long-term goals. I'd ask if he/she had a desire to try new things and take on new challenges. I'd ask if the opportunity to make considerably more money had any appeal. And if I found that there was interest based on any of those questions, I'd start talking up a selling job, presenting it as a very real "career path" option.

Then—to "close the sale"—I'd say: "What would you think about trying it out on a part-time basis? Why don't you think about that for a few days, and then let's talk again. And if you are interested, let's do both of us a favor and have you take a sales suitability profile before we get too serious."

Risk Management

Are you convinced yet that a part-time approach to outside sales makes sense? If not, here are a few more things to think about. One of the most important benefits, I think, of a part-time approach is that it mitigates your risk—both financially and operationally.

Consider the risk that most quick printers take when they hire new salespeople. For one thing, you often hire complete strangers, and while it's possible to do a pretty comprehensive interview and testing profile, you're still not going to know someone as well at the hiring stage as you will after they've worked for you for a while. Consider also that doing it this way puts your money at risk an accelerated pace. With a full-time salesperson you have to provide full-time compensation, and you have to do that with the knowledge that your return on investment will not be immediate. Your return only starts to appear when your salesperson starts to build relationships and generate a steady flow of profitable orders, and as history has shown, that doesn't always happen. And when it doesn't happen, those who put their money out the fastest are the biggest losers.

Hiring a salesperson is an investment, and the secret to successful investing is to buy something of value at the lowest possible price, then reap the benefits as its value increases. And as in other forms of investing, there's a significant downside to the "get-rich-quick" approach to hiring a salesperson. I've written before about how quick/digital/small commercial printers are often "seduced" into hiring a high-cost salesperson whose greatest talent is the ability to sell himself/herself into a job. Those people who can talk the talk but can't—or won't—walk the walk usually turn out to be very expensive mistakes.

Seek Value

Please remember, too, that buying something of value at the lowest possible price is not the same as buying something cheap! I've seen many other failures that were caused by hiring someone whose only semblance of qualification for the job was that he/she was willing to work as cheaply as the printer was willing to pay.

Now please consider this. Would you rather own part of something of real value, or all of a piece of junk? If you're like me, you'd rather own at least a piece of something of real value, and that provides some justification for the idea of employing a part-timer who is not one of your current employees. I wouldn't hesitate to consider a candidate who had another job but had time available the he/she wanted to turn into money. I'm not talking about someone

who is selling printing for someone else, or working in any capacity for another printing company, but I have several clients who are operating successfully in this way. One gets 20-25 hours each week from a young woman who also sells in a retail store. Another gets 15-20 hours each week from a man in his early 40's who wears a badge and a gun each night in his "real job" as a police officer, and her average sales volume after 8 months on the selling job is over \$12,000.

A part-time situation like this might make it possible for you to employ a high-quality person at a manageable expense, but I hope you'll see that it's not quite as good a situation as turning a current employee into a part-time outside salesperson. You get three additional benefits with that strategy: first, you'll be making the decision in the first place based on a known quantity; second, a current employee already knows something about your business; and third, you still have that person available to do his/her "other" job in your shop on a part-time basis, and also available to help you train or cross-train another person to pick up any slack.

More Next Month

Next month, I'll lay out a detailed, part-time selling program for you—including my ideas on how to compensate your part-time salesperson. For today, I hope I've convinced you that this strategy is worth thinking about!