

The Future Of Print(ing) Sales

The future of print and the future of the printing industry are obviously related, but I think it's important to separate the two in order to consider *your* future as a printing salesperson. The future of print is partly technical and partly sociological. On the technical side, we've seen amazing changes in the scope of what printing machines can do. On the sociological side, we've seen a lot of what we used to print migrate to different "substrates." I think the future of the printing industry, and your future as a printing salesperson, have a lot to do with mastering those "substrates."

What Is Printing?

What is printing anyway? Here's a fairly representative definition from one of the many online dictionaries: *Printing is the skill, process, or business of producing books, newspapers, etc., by impression from movable types, plates, etc.*

I'd like to suggest an even more basic definition: *Printing is a process for putting color on paper or other substrates.*

Let's expand on that definition. The color can be monotone, halftone or continuous tone. It can be ink or toner. It can also be words, images, or both. As for paper and other substrates, printers have always described what they do as "putting ink on paper." Obviously that has expanded to toner, but it has also expanded to clear film and vinyl and plastic and fabric. Large format printing in particular has always been about "other substrates."

But here's the main point I'm hoping to make today. A web page is a substrate. An e-mail is a substrate. A text message is a substrate. A Facebook post is a substrate. Anyplace words and/or images appear provides opportunity for the printing industry and its salespeople.

Why Is Printing?

It's not very good grammar, but "why is printing?" is still an important part of this discussion. From my perspective, there are two types of printing in the world, promotional and operational. Promotional printing is used to promote companies and their products and services—brochures, catalogs, mailers, etc. Operational printing includes forms, labels, manuals, internal documents, etc.

In the "old days" we used to print all of this on paper. These days, a lot of it is "printed" and viewed on electronic substrates. But there is still a need for assistance with the printing, and there has always been a need for assistance with the overall business strategy that the printing is part of. And that takes us to the transition from Print Provider to Marketing Services Provider, which is a very real avenue to a healthy future for the printing industry.

Can You Sell It?

I know lots of printing salespeople who aren't convinced that they can sell marketing services. "I know printing and paper and ink," one recently told me. "I don't know anything about marketing."

"That's not true," I told him. "You know more than you think. And you can learn more if you set your mind to it."

That's really the key. Some salespeople will look at this as a sales challenge, to continue to get a share of a diminishing market for ink/toner on paper. Others will see it as a learning challenge, to equip themselves to share in an even larger market. Some will accept that it's just *another* learning challenge, because after all, no one was born knowing enough about print to sell it effectively. You had to learn print, now you have to learn marketing. Or do you?

I think that depends on how much of a future you want in the printing industry. I'm 64 years old. If I were a print-only salesperson, I could probably run out the string to retirement without investing much in learning about marketing (assuming that I'm doing all right with what I have.) If you are younger, you really have to face the fact that your ability to earn a living selling print-only will diminish every year. There's going to be less print in the future than there has been in the past. That writing is already on the wall.