

## The Winds of Change

It's been said that nothing is as constant as change, and the quick printing industry is living, breathing proof of that old adage. Technology has brought incredible change—both to the printshop and to the customers' workplace. Record low unemployment rates in many areas have created a whole new pressure to find and keep good employees, and even the basic employee skillset requirement has changed over the last few years.

Even personal style has brought its share of change to the printshop; young people are going to work in bellbottoms again, and I'm pretty sure there haven't been as many tattoos on printing industry employees since just after World War II. (I'm also pretty sure there have *never* been as many rings, pins, chains and other "accessories" sticking out of the faces and bodies of printing industry employees. I know that Ben Franklin would have been amazed by the technology; I can only wonder what he would have thought of the people involved in the process of putting the ink—or toner—on the paper!)

Dealing with change is one of the basic challenges of business today, and obviously, some quick printers are handling it better than others. At least, that's true of changes that are "internal" to the industry. I've observed, though, that there are a few "external" change situations that seem to be problems for everyone, even the most progressive quick printers.

One of the most common—and problematical—of those is the situation where change occurs at the customer's workplace; specifically where things change or people change in the customer's organization.

### New Buyer, Big Problem

Here's a question I'll bet you've never thought about. How many people will be cleaning out their desks today, and leaving their current position? (I know I never thought about it until I started to write this article!) How many of those people will be moving to something else within their company? How many will be moving to a new job in a completely different company? Based on the size of our population and our economy, I wouldn't be surprised to find that the number of people leaving one job or starting a new job runs in the tens of thousands each and every day.

Now the vast majority of those changes won't effect you at all. I think we're pretty safe in saying that most of the people changing jobs every day have absolutely nothing to do with purchasing printing and/or copying services. But I also think I'm safe in the speculation that at least two or three decision-makers or decision-influencers do change within your customer base each month!

Think about it! If you're at all typical of the quick printers I work with, your customer list probably numbers between 300-500. They're probably not all "active" customers, but you think of them as customers because they've bought something from you within the last couple of years. Many of these "customers" are small companies, and the person placing orders is often a secretary or clerk or office manager who really works at the direction of someone else. (I can tell you for a fact that I've been on hundreds of sales calls where the person who places the orders admitted that he/she didn't actually make the buying decisions. That was handled at a higher level.)

So here's what you have to consider. If you have 300 companies on your customer list, there might be 600 or more people involved in the decision to buy from you. If any of them change jobs, your relationship with that company could be in danger!

### Staying On Top Of Change

The first issue we have to consider is staying on top of your customer base, so you know early on when changes are being made. Experience has shown that the earlier you know, the more likely it is that you'll survive personnel changes among your direct contacts and the people who influence their decisions.

How do you do that? The only possible way is to maintain regular two-way contact with each of your customers, and while that's possible, it's not really practical for most quick printers—certainly not in terms of 300-500 customers! You can reach out to them easily enough—using newsletters or other forms of direct marketing—but it's the two-way part that gets complicated and costly.

The good news is that it's not necessary to maintain this level of contact with every company on your customer list. This is one of those 80-20 situations, where you can protect your business pretty well by staying in close contact with the 20% or so of your customers who make up 80% or so of your business. And, of course, extending it to the 40%-50% of your customers who probably make up 90%-95% of your business protects you even better!

The strategy I suggest is to set up a "critical contact interval" for each of your important customers; a period of time that you will simply never let go by without either you hearing from them or them hearing from you. With some key customers, that interval might be as short as one week. With others who are less active and/or less important

to you, the interval might be as long as three months. Personally, I wouldn't want to go longer than three months with any customer who was even remotely important to my business.

Whatever interval you set, you have to be able to keep track of the last time you heard from the customer. In considering this, we should also give some thought to the exact definition of "hearing from" them. By the purest definition, that would mean any contact from calling in with a question to actually placing an order.

Tracking anything short of an actual order becomes increasingly more difficult as a function of the number of people who might answer your phone. For that reason, it's probably going to be easiest to base most of your intervals on the last order received. That's generally easy to do with any of the good estimating/printshop management software packages.

But what if you're not fully computerized, or if you want to keep even closer track of customer contact? In that case, I recommend that you incorporate a contact management software product like ACT into your management toolbox. ACT gives you both database and scheduling capabilities; you enter all of the contact information into the database—company name, contact name, address, phone number, etc.—and then you tell your database what you want to do next with that contact and when you want to do it. I have nearly all of the customers and prospects in my own ACT database set up on "critical contact intervals." (By the way, ACT will be the topic of next month's "Sales Clinic.")

### **S/he's Not Here Anymore!**

Let's say that you haven't heard from Jane Doe at ABC Company for six weeks—the interval you've established for her—so you call to check in. You ask for Jane, and you're told that she longer works for ABC Company!

I would want to know three things at this point: (1) Who is/will be handling her responsibilities, especially in term of buying printing and/or copying services? (2) Is this person a long-time employee of ABC Company, or a new hire? (3) Who was Jane's immediate superior, and does the new person report to the same boss? (By the way, if you're really on the ball, you already know who your key contacts report to in their own business structure!)

The first of those questions is obvious, I'm sure, but let's explore the reasoning behind the other two. If Jane's replacement is a long-time employee of ABC Company, he/she may already be familiar with the relationship between your two companies. That may provide an incentive toward continuing to do business with you, but then again it may not. The best advice is not to take anything for granted! And if Jane's replacement is a new hire, the likelihood increases that he/she will have knowledge of—or relationships with—other printing companies.

Here's what I'd say to Jane's replacement, regardless of whether she was a long-time employee or a new hire: "I enjoyed my relationship with Jane, and I think she always felt good about it too. And I definitely want to keep ABC Company as a customer. But I recognize that Jane is gone, and that I'll have to earn and keep *your* trust and confidence in order to keep ABC Company as a customer, so what do you say I come over there and we start getting to know each other. I can show you samples of the things we've done for your company, and hopefully, you can tell me something about your plans."

Please keep this in mind...you can't just say the words, you have to mean them! It may not seem fair, but when things change in a customer's organization, your relationship with that company is going to change. If nothing else, you'll have to get used to working with a different person, and things may not go as smoothly as they have in the past. It's your responsibility to make sure that the first order(s) you get from a new key contact go just as smoothly as you'd want the first order(s) to go with a completely new client organization.

### **An Important Reminder**

This might be a good time to think back to last month's "Sales Clinic." I hope you'll remember how I stressed that your customers are *the people* who trust you with their printing/copying requirements, not the companies they work for. By that definition, it should be clear that when an "old" customer is replaced by another person who is authorized to make his/her own buying decisions, you are no longer dealing with a "customer." Experience has shown that you have a better chance of keeping the company or organization's business if you treat the new person like a "prospect" and work to earn his/her trust and confidence.

### **Promotions And Transfers**

What if your "interval" call reveals that Jane Doe still works for ABC Company, but she's been promoted or transferred and her new responsibilities don't include ordering printing and/or copying? In this situation, you'd obviously still want the name of her replacement, and knowing something about that person's longevity with the company and reporting relationships would still be relevant. But don't stop there! Here's a situation where your "old" customer could be very helpful in building a connection with your new "prospect."

At the very least, I would ask Jane if she had mentioned me to her replacement, and if she could give me any suggestions on how to approach this person. At the other end of the spectrum, I think the "best case" scenario would be to arrange a visit where Jane would actually introduce me to her replacement.

This is something I've done quite a few times in my own career. One of the most successful examples I remember was a situation in which I invited one of my "Jane Doe's" to lunch to celebrate her promotion and thank her for all of the business she'd given me. When I called to set this up, I said: "Maybe when we get back from lunch, you'll have a minute to introduce me to your replacement." Jane said: "I'll do even better than that. If you want, I'll ask her to come out with us!"

It turned out to be a very interesting lunch. The first thing the new person told me was that she'd worked with several of my competitors at other jobs, and she intended to do business with people that *she* was comfortable with. Then Jane piped in and said: "You ought to at least give Dave first shot at keeping the business, because he's done a lot of good things for our company." She then proceeded to tell stories about several of my "heroic" efforts.

The result? I was given first shot at keeping the business, and that's all I needed! I made sure that the first few things we did for the new buyer went smoothly. I brought her in for a "plant tour," made sure to ask often if she had questions about the way we did things, and then answered her questions thoroughly. The bottom line is that I didn't treat her like an "old" customer until I had turned her into one. I'm not sure it would have ever gotten that far without Jane's help.

### **Upper Level Influence**

Not every "change" situation has gone so smoothly for me, though. I remember another case where the new decision-maker was especially independent. He wouldn't even take my phone calls, and at one point, he had his secretary tell me that he had his own ideas and his own suppliers, and even though I'd done a fair amount of work with his predecessor, he was going to stay with the people he knew.

After that conversation, my next call was to his boss (the same person my "old" customer reported to; I had never met the man, but I'd made it my business to know who he was.)

I explained who I was, and said something like this: "I had a pretty good relationship with 'John Doe' and from everything I heard, we never let him or your company down. Now 'John' is gone, and I can't even get the new guy to talk to me. I would never presume that we're automatically going to keep your company's business, but at the very least, I feel like we deserve a chance to sit down face-to-face with the new guy and make our case."

This executive agreed, and promised to talk to John's replacement. Within a few days, the new guy called me and we set up an appointment. It wasn't an easy meeting, but we found enough common ground that he was willing to talk to me again. Over the next couple of months we met several more times, and by the end of six months, I was handling a fair amount of business for this company again. I never got it all back, but I didn't lose it all either!

Now, there's unquestionably some risk involved in going over a buyer's head the way I did, but the way I looked at it, I had already lost the business! The only question was how hard I would fight to get it back!

### **Summary**

The two key issues in dealing with change within your customers' organizations are to stay on top of it and then to react intelligently when you discover it. I can't guarantee you that you'll always keep the business when things or people change in your customers' organizations, but I can tell you that you're a lot better off taking a proactive approach...to both key issues!

By setting "critical contact interval" for each of your important customers, you at least cut down on the length of time that you might be "in the dark" about a personnel change. The shorter that timeframe, the more likely it is that you'll make contact with the new person before he/she gets into the habit of buying from someone else.

And by treating a new buyer like a "prospect" instead of assuming you've still got a customer, you'll go a long way toward keeping the business you've been getting from that company! Remember, that may include "fighting" for the business!

And here's something else to remember. Change doesn't only occur in your customers' organizations. It also occurs pretty regularly in organizations you've tried in the past to turn into customers. The person who's said "no" to you in the past may be replaced by a person who'll say "yes" to you in the future, provided of course, that you're still out there fighting for new business.

I know that it's easy to get depressed by change that hurts your business. Remember that the winds of change can blow both ways!