

The Physics Of Printing Sales

A lot has been written about the psychology of selling over the years, and I have a couple of thoughts on that subject to share with you today. Most of what I want to talk about in this month's column, though, concerns the *physics* of both selling and sales management, because there are certain physical laws that apply to the challenges of gaining and keeping customers. The better you understand these "immutable laws of physics," the more likely you are—and your salespeople are!—to have success at meeting your sales-building challenges.

First Law

Understanding the physics of selling and sales management starts with an understanding of Newton's First Law of Motion—sometimes referred to as the "law of inertia"—which is usually stated in this way: *An object at rest tends to stay at rest and an object in motion tends to stay in motion with the same speed and in the same direction unless acted upon by an unbalanced force.*

Let's first look at Newton's First Law as it applies to sales management. Your salesperson is the "object," and your objective is to keep him/her in motion—prospecting, following up with both prospects and customers, educating, seeking out new opportunities and providing both customers and prospects with new ideas. This level of motion/activity creates heat, and I'll explain the importance of that a little farther along.

A salesperson in motion tends to stay in motion, or to put that another way, most top achievers build up some level of momentum and then keep it going—*unless they are acted upon by an unbalanced force.* What might that be? The most common negative forces I see affecting this kind of positive momentum are printshop owners and production problems.

Far too many owners become impediments to their salespeople's success by de-motivating them, with examples of this ranging from the complete absence of management to rather extreme levels of micro-management and what I can only describe as "pettiness" about commissions, expenses, and other compensation issues. Beyond that, the most common complaint I hear from salespeople is that production problems regularly cost them opportunities with prospects and stress their relationships with customers. And while I know that at least some of what I'm hearing is simply "it's not my fault" complaining from underachievers, the sheer volume of complaint seems to indicate that at least some of it is real.

As the owner/sales manager, you are the "unbalanced force" and there's no question that you want to use this power to stimulate motion. Be careful, though, to provide motivation rather than de-motivation. You have the power to push an under-performer into motion, which stands to produce the results you're looking for. Remember, though, that you also have the power to push a solid performer off-track.

Second Law

The "power to push" takes us to Newton's Second Law Of Motion, which is usually stated this way: *The acceleration of an object as produced by a net force is directly proportional to the magnitude of the net force, in the same direction as the net force, and inversely proportional to the mass of the object.* (OK, I apologize, but that's exactly what it says in the "basic physics" textbook I used to do my research for this column!) Newton's Second Law can also be expressed by the equation $F = M \times A$, or Force equals Mass times Acceleration.

Here's what this means to you as a sales manager...the farther behind your expectations your salesperson is, the harder you have to push just get him/her into motion!

Third Law

Old Sir Isaac wasn't satisfied with just two laws, but thankfully, there's only one more. Newton's Third Law of Motion tells us that: *For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.* Newton's Third Law seems to explain why most salespeople push back!

The secret to using Newton's Third Law of Motion as a sales management tool is to have a frank conversation with your salesperson. *"I'm going to push you to do the things that will make you successful,"* you might say, *"and you have to make a choice about how to respond to that. You can resist, or you can channel the energy you might have used to push back at me and simply do what I want you to do. Please make your choice NOW!"*

Application To Selling

Newton's Laws of Motion apply pretty well to the selling side of the equation too. Newton's First Law tells us that we want to create motion within the mind of the a prospect. In other words, the first step is to get him/her thinking about saying "no" to the current supplier and saying "yes" to us. The best way to do that is to ask questions to identify some way in which he/she is not being very well served by the printer-in-place.

Contrast this approach to the strategy of making a "sales presentation"—in other words, simply telling a prospect about all of your various capabilities and the quality, service and possibly pricing benefits of doing business with you. Experience has shown that most people start thinking about other things when a salesperson is doing all of the talking. If you want to create motion within the mind of the buyer, you have to engage him/her in the conversation, and you have to learn what he/she really cares about. Most buyers will respond if there's something in it *for them*, not if there's only something in it *from you*.

Newton's Second Law tells us that the more satisfied a prospect is with his/her current printer, the harder you're going to have to work to create the motion that might turn him/her into *your* customer. On the prospecting side of the equation, you have to constantly be asking yourself if any particular prospect is worth all that effort. Some prospects unquestionably are; for example, someone who you *know* buys a lot of your kind of printing. How about someone with only, say, \$1000 per year in potential? From my perspective, there are so many people/companies in that category that you'd be better off passing by the ones who don't show immediate interest in buying from you.

There's a lot of truth to the idea that it's just as easy to convince a big prospect to buy from you as a small prospect. The key is to understand that it's not how much printing they buy which determines the likelihood that they'll buy from you, it's how satisfied they are with their current printer. The most difficult challenges are the people who are happy with what they're getting from that printer-in-place, and a smart salesperson only takes on those challenges when he/she *knows* that the payoff will be worth the effort.

That takes us to the sales application of Newton's Third Law. The "force" you apply to a prospect can actually be processed in one of two ways. It can be reflected back at you in a classic "equal and opposite" reaction—in other words, the prospect is pushing you away—or it can be channeled toward working with you. Obviously, the latter is a better situation!

By the way, Newton's Laws of Motion also have some bearing on the other half of the printing sales equation...keeping the customers you already have! The "law of inertia" tells us that that they'll stay with us if we keep them happy, and Newton's Second Law explains that some customers require—and are worth—a higher level of effort in order to keep them happy. Newton's Third Law demonstrates the equilibrium of a solid and profitable customer relationship; one where you get value from the relationship that's equal to the effort you put in.

Taking The Temperature

I noted earlier that *heat* is created when a salesperson puts forth an appropriate level of motion/activity. In a process that so often starts out with a "cold" call, it should be easy to understand that creating "warmth" is the essence of effective selling. I've been talking a lot about "taking temperature" with my sales coaching clients recently, and actually measuring their progress with specific prospects by having them report back to me on temperature changes.

The starting point in this exercise is that there's a temperature at which someone will start buying from you. We use 98.6 degrees as that value in these discussions. When a salesperson tells me that he/she is at 90 degrees with a prospect, I take that to mean that a first order is imminent. A temperature of 80 degrees might mean that the prospect is showing all of the signs of buying, but there hasn't yet been an appropriate project on the table. A temperature of 70 degrees would indicate progress, and a prospect who is probably worth continuing with.

At the other end of the scale, a temperature of 20 degrees might indicate a prospect who looks to have significant potential after the initial prospecting activities, or it might indicate someone who seems to have potential but hasn't shown any interest in changing printers. The key to this strategy is to make decisions based on temperature *change*, not just temperature. In other words, if continued sales activity produces an increase in temperature, you keep working that prospect. If the temperature stalls—especially in the low temperature ranges—you consider moving on to another prospect. If it stalls at a higher level, say 60-70 degrees, you ask yourself what you could/should do differently to try to get the temperature back on the rise.

I've found this to be a very good technique for keeping salespeople focused on both time management and effective selling strategy. We also use this technique to evaluate the "safety factor" with current customer relationships.

A Little Psychology

As promised, I have a couple of thoughts on the psychology of selling to share with you today too. I want to (re)introduce you to the work of B.F. Skinner, whose research demonstrated that *any behavior which is rewarded will tend to be repeated*. If I remember right, Skinner worked both with mice and monkeys, but the good news is that his principles work equally well with salespeople *and* with customers.

I've written before that the secret to effective sales management is to manage behavior, not simply to measure sales volume. The behavior that leads to sales volume starts with prospecting and follow up activity—cold calls, networking, research and referral-gathering, followed by phone calls, faxes, letters, e-mails. Experience has shown that a salesperson who puts forth enough of this behavior/activity will end up with face-to-face appointments—where the real selling gets done—and those conversations will motivate some of the salesperson's prospects to eventually become customers.

Your challenge as a sales manager is to motivate this behavior, and your best strategy for doing that probably involves some pushing—to overcome inertia and get a stalled salesperson into motion—along with the “pulling power” you'll get if you reward your salesperson for exhibiting the desired behavior. That might be a tangible reward; for example, tying compensation directly to the behavior you want to see. It might be less tangible; for example, a simple “well done” when you see the behavior you're looking for. The best strategy is probably a combination of both tangible and intangible rewards.

With customers, the opportunities may be different, but the principle works pretty much the same. As an example, what do you think of the idea of rewarding your customers who pay you on time? You could do something tangible; for example, a thank you note along with a gift certificate of some sort. Or you could do something less tangible; for example, just making sure that their jobs go to the head of the line and get delivered earlier than needed. Either way, rewarding their behavior certainly should increase the chances that it will be repeated.

Please keep this in mind, though. There's sort of a “flip side” to Skinner's work which goes something like this...*any behavior which is tolerated will also tend to be repeated*. I believe in taking action when you're not seeing the behavior you want. I'll write more about that next month.