

Fundamentals Beat Flash

The guys I play basketball with call me “Old School.” I think that has more to do with my age than my playing style, but I consider it a compliment nonetheless. And the fact of the matter is that my game is a lot more fundamentals than flash.

An attendee at a recent seminar called me a dinosaur. “I came here looking to find some new ideas,” he said. “You didn’t teach me anything about selling comprehensive printing solutions at the C-Level in the digital arena, just the same old ‘prospect-and-follow-up-and-ask-good-questions’ crap I’ve been hearing from my boss. Dinosaurs are extinct, man, and you’re not helping me any by telling me to sell like one.”

In case you’re interested, this guy was sent to my seminar because he’s averaging about \$7500 per month after a year and a half on the job. Personally, I think he’s a whole lot closer to being extinct than I am.

Prospect And Follow Up

There’s nothing more fundamental than prospecting and follow up, but we don’t see enough of it from quick/small commercial printing salespeople. Beyond that, most of the prospecting and follow up we see is not being done very well. Another attendee at the same seminar told me that she’s waiting until the first of the year when the new Chamber of Commerce Directory comes out to begin a new round of prospecting efforts. “I don’t know where else to look for prospects,” she said. “How about up and down the streets of your city and the surrounding towns?” I asked.

At the end of the first day of the seminar, after hearing me describe a process by which she could walk into buildings and speak with “gate-keepers” and walk out with the name of a decision-maker and a decision on whether a company was worth pursuing—and a follow up plan for the “keepers”—she said: “That makes so much sense! Now I don’t have to make cold calls to the same list everyone else is probably calling. I get a name, I send my introductory letter, then I call to follow up on the letter and ask for an appointment. If I walk into even 20 places each week and decide that 10 of them are worth following up on, and I get 1-2 of those to agree to meet with me, I’m going to have a real prospect pipeline and I’m going to get some business out of it!” I couldn’t have said it better myself.

Ask Good Questions

I went out on a first appointment sales call with a young salesperson last week, and the salesperson made his standard presentation—his “spiel” as he referred to it—and then we pretty much left. “How did I do?” he asked me as we walked out of the building. “

Well, that depends on what you were trying to accomplish,” I told him. “We you hoping to educate your prospect or trying to educate yourself?”

“Why would I need to educate myself?” he asked. “I know what we do.”

“Sure,” I said, “but do you know what he needs? Or more importantly, what he wants from a printing company and might not be getting from the printer he’s buying from now?”

I’m a very strong believer in a three-part definition of a “fully qualified” prospect. The first part is that they buy exactly the kind of printing you’re best equipped to sell. The second part is that they buy enough of it to make them worth pursuing. The third part—and ultimately the most important part—is that they have some interest in buying from you. Don’t ever forget that every significant prospect is someone else’s customer right now. With very few exceptions, every business or organization has purchased printing before, and even if it’s a new business or organization, the people who work in it have probably had dealings with other printing salespeople and printing companies.

If all you’re doing is making a “spiel,” you’re talking but not qualifying. And I don’t care how much flash you put in your presentation, it’ll be worthless if they don’t actually buy the kind of printing you sell, and even more worthless if you can’t give them a good reason to stop buying from the other guys and start buying from you. “We do digital printing” is not a good reason to change printers. “Thanks for answering my questions and telling me about those problems you’ve been having and giving me the opportunity to tell you about a possible solution” is a much better strategy.

And while I’m on the subject of “making a spiel,” I always want to smack any salesperson who uses that word. It’s a derogatory term for what should be a highly professional endeavor. It’s bad enough that the most of the general public holds the sales profession in such low regard. I hate it when salespeople perpetuate the stereotype with words or actions or attitudes.

No Jargonauts Need Apply

Another fundamentals vs. flash issue is salespeople who speak fluent jargon, or who seek to impress potential clients with big words—often misused—when smaller words would make for more effective communication. Last month I made four sales calls with a salesperson who used the word “facilitate” so many times during the first call that I consciously counted the number of times he used it on the next three—16 times! At one point, he said: “I want to facilitate a dynamic process of making it productive for you to order all of your image-dependent printing from me.”

Here’s what I think he meant: “I think I can make your life a little easier—at least the part where you’re involved with printing and printers—and I hope that will earn me a large share of your business...especially the jobs that have to be done right the first time!”

Which one of those statements makes the most sense—or has the most appeal—to you? Do you sometimes wonder what the salespeople who call on you are actually trying to say? How many times in the last 6 months have you heard some variation of: “Our (digital workflow/document handling/paper ordering/production tracking/employee benefits) solution will foster an improved business model and enable greater profitability.” Does that make you want to buy it, or call for help?

Bottom Line

The bottom line to this discussion is that fundamentals beat flash in selling far more often than the other way around. The salesperson who asks the best questions is most likely to find real opportunity, and in turn most likely to present the best solutions to whatever problems his/her prospect may be having. I’ll grant you that the printing industry has changed dramatically over the last 5, 10, 20 or even 50 years, but the fundamentals of selling have not changed a bit. I vote for more “old school” and less jargon and more prospecting and better questions and more professionalism and less emphasis on finding new sales paradigms and other non-existent shortcuts. And less excuses, while we’re at it, but that’s a topic for another day.