

More Than Just Ink On Paper

Here's my basic premise for today: Every job that comes through your shop is a combination of two things...ink on paper and words on paper. And if one is more important than the other in terms of the printed piece working *for your customer*, it's probably the words!

So how does that effect me, you ask. I'm the printer. The words are not my responsibility, quality printing is what people want from me.

I say that's true, but only up to a point. And that point provides you with an opportunity to add another value to your shop...to differentiate yourself from all the other printers in your area who are capable of producing top quality printing.

Differentiation

Differentiation is a key concept in marketing. Showing how your product is different goes along way toward showing how your product is *better*. Before we talk about using the words as a means of differentiating your printshop, though, I think it's worth a moment to look at some of the techniques that typical printers are using now.

I opened my yellow pages to do the research for this quick study. There are 41 printers listed in my directory, serving Lansdale and Souderton, PA, and surrounding communities. (To give you an idea of the size of these communities, the white pages section of the directory is 5/8 " thick.)

Of the 41 printers listed, 19 took out display ads ranging in size from 1/3 page to 1 inch by two columns. Right there is one of the techniques that some printers use to differentiate their shops...a larger Yellow Pages ad!

In terms of what the ads said, 4 featured the types of products the printer sells (letterheads, brochures, business cards, etc.), and 7 featured the types of services provided, such as typesetting, paste-up, folding, and binding. The other 8 ads listed both products and services. Fourteen of the ads stressed high quality. Eleven of the ads stressed fast, friendly, and dependable service.

Let's say I'm in need of a brochure. I have the basic idea, but I need it typeset, pasted up, and then printed. I obviously want a top quality print job, and a reasonably fast delivery. Those 19 display ads in my Yellow Pages sift down to give me 11 different printers who say they print brochures, set type, and provide paste-up, and will meet my delivery needs with high quality printing. That's not a great deal of differentiation!

Commodity Services

I'm not saying that you can't be valuable and important to your customers by delivering high quality printing. I just want you to understand that any other printer can too! Quality printing isn't magic, it's execution of proper technique and a watchful eye for the occasional failure. The same thing holds true for meeting delivery requirements, being friendly and courteous, and even beating someone else's prices. What it boils down to is this...quality, service, and price are commodity products in the quick printing business today!

That leaves you with additional services as the only real means to establish some difference between your shop and every other shop. Typesetting was once a significant additional service, but it's become less so since "desktop publishing" has become such a factor in the market. FAX is a valuable additional service, but it's not one that provides you much differentiation from your competitors...they have FAX service too!

If you really want to stand out in your marketplace, you can do it by being the leader in new services. Important new services. And this brings me back to my basic premise for today: the words on the paper are often more important than the ink on the paper in making any particular printed piece work for your customer.

Promotional Printing

Now, I want to digress for a moment and explain that I'm not talking about letterheads and business cards here. There are two purpose-related types of printing that are likely to go through your shop: promotional printing and informational printing.

Promotional printing is used to sell something...products, services, or even ideas. A sales brochure is obviously promotional printing, but so is a menu, or a flyer announcing an open house for a real estate company. The language used in a promotional piece can have a very dramatic effect on whether that piece does it's job for your customer or not. I think it's also fair to say that a fairly large percentage of the informational printing required in this world is used in support of the sale of some product or service. An instruction sheet, for example, might explain how to put together some product that a customer is going to buy. That product is worthless if it can't be put together and put into service. (This might be a perfect example. Have you ever cursed a printed set of instructions that just didn't make sense?)

Bad Writing

I read just about everything that comes in the mail. I also read just about every promotional flyer or brochure that I come across. Part of the reason is that I'm always looking for ideas. The other part may be that I have a perverse sense of humor. What I want to tell you is this: there's a lot of really bad writing getting printed today. Some of it is the stuff that would bring out your English teacher's red pencil...bad grammar, poor sentence structure, and incorrect vocabulary. That sort of writing doesn't do much for the image of the originator. (Your customer?) But just as bad from the perspective of the printed piece working or not is *uninteresting* writing that doesn't get the reader's attention, or *confusing* writing that doesn't get the point across.

In the world of "big-time" advertising and promotion, there are often at least three people involved in the development of an ad or brochure. There's the creative director, who comes up with the "look" of the piece. Then there's the graphic artist who prepares the piece for the printer by creating the finished artwork. The third member of the team is the copywriter who (hopefully) weaves magic with words and language so the reader of the eventual printed piece completely understands the benefits of the product, service, or idea, and can't help but buy.

Copywriting is a talent, a skill. It's not something that everyone is good at. The "big-timers" recognize this, and hire people with the talent if they don't have it themselves. Smaller companies—like your customers—all too often write it themselves, and settle for less than a professional image, or less-than-possible results.

Inside Or Outside

This is an area where you can help your customers. Here is what I suggest: start out with a realistic analysis of your own writing skills and those of your employees. Is there anyone in your organization with background and talent in writing, either through work experiences or education? If there is, you have the basis for an important in-house service to offer your customers.

If there isn't someone in your organization, there are several outside possibilities. You can find a couple of professional copywriters to whom you can refer customers who need writing help. Many professional copywriters are free-lancers who take on work from a variety of clients. (Actually, if the free-lancers in your area are at all on the ball, they will have already been around to introduce themselves to you in hope of referrals). The downside here, of course, is that a professional can be expensive. Please remember, though, that expensive is a relative term, and it should not be you who makes the decision that \$200.00 worth of writing talent is too much for your customer to spend on a \$200.00 print job. Good writing could be the difference between a flyer that produces \$200.00 in sales, or \$20,000.00!

Here's another possibility, and it's one I like a lot. Try a couple of local English teachers. You will almost certainly find some who have studied writing, perhaps written for a college newspaper or had some other forms of practical writing experience. The way we pay teachers in most parts of this country, I have seldom spoken with one who could not use some additional income. And since it would be additional income, a teacher's expectations and requirements for payment might be quite a lot lower than a full-time professional copywriter. Good for the teacher...good for your customer...good for you too!

Selling The Service

When a job comes into your shop, start by reading it. If it doesn't read smoothly—if you find bad grammar, if you don't understand what you're reading—bring it to your customer's attention. I'll grant you that this could be tricky—no one really likes to have their work criticized—but if it's handled right you can really establish a value that your competitors don't provide.

"Jack, let me tell you something, and I don't want to offend you in any way, but this part here doesn't make sense to me. Do you think there's any chance that your prospects who get this brochure will find it confusing too?"

"We have a service that we call (Help-Write, Wordsmith, CopyCoach? What sounds good to you?). Why don't you let us take a shot at re-writing what you have here to see if we can make it work a little better for you. Let us work with it overnight, and we'll have something for you to look at in the morning."

If you have the talent in-house to improve the copy, you might use this as simply a value-added service, something you do at no charge. With a teacher involved, you might work out a flat fee of, say, \$20.00 for a one page or less re-write.

"Jack, we have a couple of local English teachers who do lots of this sort of work for us. There's a cost of \$20.00, but you're going to like what they come back with. It's usually just a matter of 'smoothing out' what you've written, just to be sure that everyone will understand it, and the piece will do what you need it to."

Take A Good Look

If you don't believe copy coaching is needed by your customers, I urge you to take a close look at everything you print in the next couple of weeks. I think you'll agree then with my statement that there's a lot of bad writing getting printed these days.

Every need creates opportunity. Initially your opportunity is to improve on what your customers bring to you. That in itself gives you a leg up on getting the next job, and the next one. Ultimately, you could develop this service to the point where your customers bring the copy to you before the rest of the job, or flat out hire you to write the copy from scratch. It's been proven in this business that the earlier you get involved in a project, the better chance you have of getting the job and getting it at your price.

So there it is! The words on the paper can be more important than the ink on the paper. And there is a very definite need for somebody to help many small businesses with those words. If you can establish that service—that value!—you can use it to sell more ink on paper, and probably at higher prices too.

I once wrote a mission statement for a printer that I worked for that read, in part, that our mission was “to see and solve all the problems before ink goes on paper.” The printer who makes the most of that word *all* can be the most valuable one in town.