

Three Strategies For Increasing Walk-In Business

This month's Sales Clinic column may not be for everyone, since many quick printers have de-emphasized the walk-in segment of the business over the years. Still, though, many of you value the customers who walk in your doors, and would like to see more of them. If that's your situation, here are three strategies that can make it happen.

Employees As Ambassadors

Let's do a little bit of arithmetic. How many hours each week do your employees spend in your shop? The "average" is probably somewhere in the neighborhood of 40-45 hours. With a total of 168 hours in every calendar week, that means that an "average" industry employee spends perhaps 25% of his/her time at work...and close to 75% of each week away from the printshop!

What they do during those hours is mostly out of your control, but not completely removed from your influence. Many successful retail businesses have established a culture of "employees as ambassadors" which contributes heavily to their success.

It's a very simple strategy, and here's how it works. First, you provide each of your employees with their own business cards. (Yes, including production people, full or part-time...this is certainly easy enough and inexpensive enough for any quick printer to manage!) Then you encourage each employee to pass those cards out whenever it seems appropriate.

Now, please understand this...I'm not suggesting that you turn your employees into business-card-handing-out maniacs. I certainly don't want that sort of person anywhere near me! What I am suggesting is that you explain clearly what you mean by "appropriate" situations.

Let's say that your press operator attends a friend's wedding, and meets up there with old high school classmates he/she hasn't seen in years. Isn't it likely that the conversation will turn to "what are you doing these days?" Wouldn't it be easy enough for your employee to say "I work for a printshop in town" and then follow that up with a question: "Are you involved in the printing and/or copying for the company you work for?" If the answer is "yes," that's a perfect opportunity to pass along a business card and say "you should give us a try!" If the answer is "no, but I know the people who are," that's still an opportunity to serve as an ambassador for your business. "If I give you my business card," your employee might say, "would you pass it along to them and tell them you know me?"

That could lead to a new customer walking into your shop, or else calling you on the telephone. Either way, I hope you'll agree that this would represent a fairly significant marketing victory gained at a very low cost. You may not have hundreds of these "networking" opportunities each week or each month, but if your employees are paying attention—and if they're well prepared with an explanation of what sort of situations to be looking for and exactly how to respond (and, of course, the business cards!)—you stand to gain at least a few customers each year from this very simple strategy.

Capturing Telephone Inquiries

How many times does your telephone ring each week, with a person on the other end—one you've never heard from before—asking for a price on some project or another? What percentage of those phone calls result in orders? If you're at all typical of the rest of the industry, the percentage is probably pretty low. The typical scenario is that the "customer" is sitting with the Yellow Pages open, calling two, three or twenty printers to see who has the lowest price or the fastest delivery.

What would happen if you "invited" every one of those callers to come and meet you in your shop? You or your front counter sales/customer service employees might say something like this: "I'm guessing that you're calling a few printers to get a price on this project, and I'd be very surprised if we're the one's with the lowest price. But there are reasons that you should buy from us that go way beyond the price, and the best way I could show you what that means is if I could get you to actually come into our shop. Would you be willing to do that?"

You could even add: "You know, we often find that when we actually get to see what you're trying to do, we'll have suggestions on how to do it at a lower cost, and that's something you won't always get from other printers in town."

Here's something I can promise you...you won't be overrun with telephone callers taking you up on your "invitation." Most callers will probably prefer to "let their fingers do the walking" and do their shopping based only on what they learn on the telephone. But experience has shown that some of these callers will take you up on the

“invitation,” and those callers usually turn into customers. The way I look at it, anything you can do that results in “capturing” one of these telephone callers—especially at your price!—represents another significant marketing victory.

By the way, you may have noticed that I put the various versions of the word “invite” in quotes each time. I think it’s important to note that we’re not “demanding” that they come into your shop as a precondition for giving them a quote. I know printers who do that, and from what I can see, they don’t get many orders from telephone inquiries. I think you have to accept that giving quotes out over the phone is part of the reality of this business, but that doesn’t mean that there aren’t things that you can do to increase the likelihood that some of these quotes will turn into orders...or better still, real customer relationships. Part of the secret to success in selling is to always ask for some level of commitment. They don’t all say “yes,” but the simple fact of asking takes your interest in doing business with them to another level.

Remember, most people want to do business with people who want to do business with them. If one printer shows real interest and two or three others don’t—“Here’s the price....give us a call if you want to place the order”—the one who shows real interest will stand out in the crowd, and may very well be able to get the order even if he/she doesn’t quote the lowest price!

Pass The Word!

How much of your new business comes from “word of mouth.” Many quick/digital/small commercial printers seem to feel that “word of mouth” is responsible for a large percentage of their business. (I often find that’s because these printers aren’t doing much else in the way of sales/marketing, so anything they get has to be a result of this “word of mouth” stuff, but that’s a column for another day.)

How does “word of mouth” work exactly? In theory, what happens is that satisfied customers make it their business to tell other people about how much they like doing business with you. In practice, however, there’s not nearly as much “word-of-mouth” going on as many printers would like to believe. Sure, satisfied customers must occasionally be telling other people about you, but if it was happening as regularly as you’d like to think, wouldn’t there be even more new customers beating their way to your doors?

The good news here is that you don’t have to sit back passively and “hope” that your satisfied customers will tell others about you. If you want them to do that, sometimes all you have to do is ask!

I would make it a point to have a “word of mouth conversation” with current customers. “You seem to like doing business with us,” you might say. “We’d sure appreciate it if you’d ‘pass the word’ to any of your friends or co-workers who might have a need for our services. We’ll try to take just as good care of them as we do of you.”

Will every customer cooperate? Probably not, but wouldn’t you agree that you have a better chance of making it happen if you ask? As I said earlier, sometimes all you have to do to get the order—or whatever commitment you’re looking for—is to ask!

Hit The Accelerator!

One of the buzzwords in marketing these days is “accelerator.” The term refers to any action or strategy that will increase the likelihood of gaining the desired result from a marketing program, or will make it happen faster. The “accelerator” concept could apply to any of the three strategies I’ve presented today. For example, you could accelerate the likelihood of your employees buying in on the “ambassador strategy” by paying a bonus any time the strategy leads to a new customer. In the same way, you could pay a bonus any time one of your employees “captures” a telephone inquiry and convinces that person to actually come into the shop.

How about providing some added incentive for the caller? “The reasons you should buy from us go way beyond the price,” you might say, “and the best way I can show you what that means is if I can get you to actually come into our shop. So how about this...if you’ll come in sometime today or tomorrow, I’ll take a look at your project to see if I might to save you time or money in getting it printed, and I’ll make you up some free personalized notepads!”

How about an accelerator for the “pass the word” strategy? One possibility would be coupons which both the “passer” and the “receiver” could use to reduce the price of their next—or first—order with your company. Please don’t make them “discount” coupons, though. I have long been opposed to discount coupons for two reasons: first because I don’t like the perception that printing is a “discount” business; and second, because a discount can turn out to be a very expensive proposition. Consider the possibility that you’re asked to quote on a large job for a new customer, and you quote it aggressively—say 15% below normal—because you want to “get your foot in the door.” At payment time, you find out that your new customer has a “20% discount on your first order” coupon. At that point, the order may not look all that attractive, foot in the door or not!

Sure, you could put in all sorts of qualifiers to protect you, but that in itself is often self-defeating. As an example, I get all sorts of “special” offers from hotels and rental car companies because I travel so much, but it turns out that

I can't use most of them because of the qualifiers. The result is that the hotels and rental car companies don't get any "acceleration" with me from these offers.

I'd much rather have them—or you—give me something that comes without any strings attached, even if it's something "smaller" than what you would have offered me with conditions that had to be met. That might translate into coupons worth "Five Bucks Toward Anything You Need Printed Or Copied...With No Strings Attached!" To me, that's enough of an "accelerator" to encourage people to pass the word about you. Remember, we're talking about walk-in customers here and generally small orders. We're also betting, though, that the "lifetime value" of both the old customer and any new customers will make this a good marketing investment.

By the way, that's exactly how you should view all of the costs associated with a strategy such as this. The five dollars is not a discount, it's a marketing investment. And I don't know about you, but I think five dollars—or ten for that matter—would be a very reasonable investment in gaining a new retail customer, especially considering that mailing to a prospect once each month for a year will in all likelihood cost even more than that! In this way, you stand to gain something with both the new customer and the old one, and that represents another fairly significant sales/marketing victory.

Closing Thoughts

I wrote this column with somewhat mixed emotions, because if I were a quick/digital/small commercial printer today, I would be one of the one's who has de-emphasized walk-in business. My preferred strategy would combine a lower visibility/lower cost facility with an outside sales effort, to seek out and bring in some of the more substantial printing/copying users in my area. But I recognize that that's not the right strategy for many of you, either by choice or by circumstances somewhat beyond your control...like a long-term commitment to a lease in a high visibility, retail area.

I guess the bottom line here is that there's more than one way to skin most cats, and walk-in business can be a significant contributor to profitability. If that's your situation and your business strategy, I hope I've given you a few ideas on how to bring more people into your shop!