

One Step Ahead Of The Shoeshine

Paul Simon is a businessman. It's a different kind of business than yours, perhaps, but in 50+ years as a singer/songwriter/performer he has faced the same core selling challenge you face every day. His business depends on getting people to buy what he has to sell, and he actually reflected on that in a song he wrote for the Bridge Over Troubled Water album all the way back in 1970.

*I'm one step ahead of the shoeshine,
Two steps away from the county line,
Just trying to keep my customers satisfied, Satisfied.*

I reflected on that song myself in a sales coaching call this morning. My client was complaining about a customer she can't seem to satisfy, no matter what she does.

Good Customers

I think you know that there are good customers and not-so-good customers. At the far end of the not-so-good scale, there are some who are simply bad customers. I'll come back to them in a moment. For now, let me ask this question: How do you define a good customer?

I would guess that the first criteria you consider is sales volume. Fair enough, but isn't it true that bigger is not always better? Sales volume is often *indicative* of profitability, but it's not always *definitive*. And profitability is the real issue. In fact, the customer my client was complaining about today is a high-volume, low-profit customer, a not-for-profit organization that is especially price-driven.

She has told me in the past that they "eat up a lot of overhead." I've told her in the past that's a dangerous way of thinking, because she's using a lot of her capacity to service this customer – and I'm not just talking about production capacity. In addition to press time and pre-press time, this customer also requires a great deal of sales time and customer service time. The bottom line is that they're more trouble than they're worth, and that's how I define a bad customer.

Bad Customers

So what should you do with any customers who are more trouble than they're worth? You may be thinking "He's going to tell me I should fire them," and it may come to that, but ending the relationship should always be Plan B. Plan A should always be to talk about the issues and see if there's some way to resolve them. It's been my experience that there are only two reasons that bad customers exist. The most obvious is because some people are jerks. Maybe less obvious is because others are *civilians* – that's my term for people who don't have professional knowledge of how to work well with a printing company. It has been my experience that *civilians* can often be trained to be better customers. The jerks? Well, shouldn't we let them be someone else's customers – and somebody else's problems?

Bad Performance?

That takes us back to the fundamental issue of what it takes to keep *your* customers satisfied. Let's look at that from an opposite perspective. What would cause them to be less than fully satisfied? Obviously quality failures or service failures would accomplish that, but let's dig deeper, especially on the service end. Printers tend to think that "good service" is mostly about providing a quality product, delivering it on time, and charging a fair price. Print buyers tend to talk about "meeting or exceeding my expectations." I've heard printers use those words too, but I've also observed that, all too often, printers are completely in the dark about what those expectations are!

So with apologies to Paul Simon, let's add some lyrics to his song:

*I'm going to talk to my customers,
Before I print for them, and afterwards too.
I'm going to make sure understand what they want from me
And I'm going to make sure I get what I need from them too
And then we all can be happy and satisfied, Satisfied.*