

The Importance Of Selling Yourself

I found an interesting article online recently, originally published in the Harvard Business Review. The author, Steve W. Martin, wrote on “6 Reasons Salespeople Win or Lose a Sale,” presenting findings from his years of win-loss analysis and research.

“There’s a tendency,” he wrote, “to assume that the salesperson lost because their product was inferior in some way. However, in the majority of interviews buyers rank all the feature sets of the competing products as being roughly equal. This suggests that other factors separate the winner from the losers.”

That sounds like printing to me. It’s the same paper and the same ink, and my own research supports the idea that most printing buyers think of printing as a commodity product. But as I’ve been saying for years, printing companies and most importantly printing salespeople are not commodities.

And, as others besides me have also been saying, first you have to sell yourself, then you have to sell your company, and only then will you have the best chance of selling your product.

Three Salespeople

Martin posed this question: Imagine three salespeople who’ve pitched products that are very similar in functionality and price. Which would you rather do business with?

1. A professional salesperson who knows their product inside and out but is not necessarily someone you would consider befriending.
2. A friendly salesperson who is likable and proficient in explaining their product.
3. A charismatic salesperson who you truly enjoyed being with but is not the most knowledgeable about their product.

The top selection in every industry Martin studied was the friendly salesperson. So what does that mean to you? You should probably aspire to *friendly*, *likeable* and *proficient*, but that’s not the whole story. You must also sell yourself as trustworthy.

Why is that? Because you sell a custom-manufactured product, and they know a lot can go wrong between order and delivery. I can sum up your ultimate sales pitch in just a few words: *I promise that none of the bad things that could happen, will happen, if you do business with me.*

Friendly, Likeable and Proficient

Now, setting aside that I hate the term sales pitch — and that’s a topic for another day! — this really is the essence of what you’re selling. If you can convince people that you can and will keep that promise, they’ll probably think seriously about buying from you. So let’s go back to the words *friendly*, *likeable* and *proficient*. *Friendly* and *likeable* create an environment where they may want to trust you, but *proficient* is the element that takes you to the finish line.

That takes me to the main point this column. Most printing company owners are, at best, reluctant salespeople. (Thank you Tom Crouser for adding that term to my vocabulary!) But they are also friendly, likeable and proficient in explaining their product. If I come into your shop, you are all of those things. Why can’t you take those same traits to my office?

The answer, of course, is that you can. So here’s what I propose. Make a list of 100 companies that might make good customers. Do some research to identify one or more decision-makers at each company. Then reach out by phone and/or e-mail using this sales pitch: “I’m the owner of ABC Printing. I’m pretty friendly and reasonably likeable, but most importantly, I know a lot about printing — and also about how you might use it more effectively in your business. Would you be interested in talking with me?”

I think the best overall strategy is an e-mail followed up by a phone call. Give them two chances to give you a chance. If they don’t say yes, go on to the next call. If they do say yes, go meet with them and be friendly, likeable and proficient.

And don’t expect everyone to say yes. But don’t expect everyone to say no either!