

Invisibility

Last month, I wrote about *transparency*. This month, my topic is *invisibility*. And to begin with, I want to stress that they are not the same thing.

As I wrote last month, a transparent selling strategy—one that a buyer can see right through—is a very good thing. Invisibility, though—not being seen at all!—is a very bad thing for a printing salesperson and for a printing company.

How You Get There

How does a printing company become invisible? It starts with a reduction in marketing effort, and sadly, that's a very common occurrence when sales volume declines—as many printers are experiencing right now! The most common response to sales dollars not coming in seems to be marketing dollars not going out. On an intellectual level, I think most printers realize that's exactly the wrong thing to do, but they do it anyway. Marketing is traditionally the first thing that gets cut when business slows down.

And it's not just printers! In fact, you can make the case that the reason most printers are slow is that their customers are not marketing their own businesses. That's only part of the problem, though. The larger problem is most printers aren't working hard enough to capture a larger share of the diminished market.

Here's some arithmetic to consider. If the volume of printing in the quick/digital/small commercial segment is down by 12-15% as I am hearing, one of the possible end results is that every quick/digital/small commercial printer will be down by exactly that amount. Another possible result, though, is that 80% of all printers in the quick/digital/small commercial category will be up by 5-8%, and the other 20% will go out of business. OK, the math is not exact, but I hope you'll get my point. You may have to participate in the recession, or whatever it is that we have here, but you don't have to share in it equally. Those who get going when the going gets tough almost always survive—and not just survive, but prosper!

How You Get Out Of There

OK, how do you avoid invisibility? First and foremost, I think you should be doing lots of the things that cost the least. Call on your customers. (Don't just wait for them to call you!) Call on your prospects. (And if you don't have any real prospects, develop some!) I'm talking about phone calls, and hopefully about appointments that will result from those phone calls.

I'm talking about asking your customers about their goals and plans for the next 6-8 months, and about how you can help them to execute those plans and meet their goals. I'm talking about asking prospects to consider that you might be able to save them some combination of time and aggravation and maybe even money if they sit down and talk with you, and beyond, that, you may even have some ideas about how they can increase their own sales volume through more effective marketing.

With your customers, these may be *defensive* conversations—staying in close touch to minimize the likelihood that a competitor will take the customer away from you. With your prospects, these are *offensive* conversations—not in the “offend them” sense, but in an effort to grow your own business by taking them away from their current supplier. And don't lose sight of the *offensive* potential of these conversations with your customers. If you've only been getting a share of their business, this is your opportunity to compete for a larger share!

The least costly marketing activity available to you is for you, as the owner, to make sales calls. And please don't tell me that business is way down and you still don't have time to do that!

High Visibility

What else can you do to increase your visibility? Direct mail is an obvious possibility, especially the sort of highly personalized direct mail that's less costly to printers than to their customers. It would be smart, though, to spend some time with your mailing list, to make sure that you're mailing to companies that have real potential, and to make sure that you're mailing to the person in those companies who makes the buying decision. I can't prove this, but I'm still pretty sure that most printers waste 50% or more of what they spend on direct mail, simply because of the (lack of) quality of their mailing list.

Beyond direct mail, what kind of shape is your building signage in? If any of your lights are out, this would be a really good time to fix them. How about window graphics? Are they in good shape? Can they be seen at a maximum distance? Do you have an awning out front, from which you can hang a banner?

How about your delivery vehicle? How about your personal car, for that matter? On one hand, I would feel pretty stupid driving around town with a “David Fellman & Associates” sign on my car. On the other hand, though, if

visibility was critical to my business success, I'd do it in a heartbeat! If I were you, I would even extend that to my employees. I'd even be willing to pay them for the opportunity to put my signs on their cars. (How's that, by the way, for *thinking outside the box*?)

Do you spend money on radio advertising? I wouldn't do that. From my perspective, the demographics are just too hard to figure out. The same goes for television, because the "spots" that most printers can afford are probably not at the times that printing buyers are watching TV, and again, the demographics on who's watching what are too complex to guarantee success. I would, though, consider billboard advertising—there's a lot of visibility! The key is a sign location that gets a lot of traffic, and here's something else to consider: the billboard guys have seen a significant drop in their business too. There are good sites available in most cities, and the pricing is pretty aggressive.

Final Thought

Here's a final thought for today. As I wrote earlier, invisibility is a very bad thing for both a printing salesperson and a printing company. If you're a salesperson—or the owner in the sales role—how do you deal with customers who are content to just send in their orders when they need something, and prospects who don't want to spend any time with another printing salesperson?

The answer is both complex and simple, and the simple part is to *not be* just another printing salesperson! OK, maybe that's a simple statement that is complex in execution, but it gives me something to write about next month. For now, let's operate on the assumption that *some of* your customers and prospects will be happy to spend time with you if you ask them to!