The Art Of Apology

It's an unfortunate truth in the quick printing business that mistakes are going to happen. It's been said that Murphy's Law runs wild in in a printshop, and that every job that comes into your shop is an accident looking for a place to happen.

The vast majority of quick printers strive for quality, and the best ones have established a high level of consistent *total quality*, which means quality of product, service, *and* relationship.

But even for those quick printers, it seems unavoidable that a bad one gets out of the shop every once in a while. or one goes out later than it was promised. What you do when one of those things happens is a measure of your committment to *total quality*, and to truly taking care of your customers.

Learning Early

My father taught me something early on in my life about handling mistakes and problems. When I was just a kid, he'd take me along on a day of sales calls from time to time, partly for the company, but I think also partly for the opportunity to teach me a few things about life in a "real-world" environment.

I remember a particular day when we walked into the offices of one of his customers (my dad sold office supplies) and were met by a man who was clearly annoyed. He said, *"You guys fouled up, and we have a big problem,"* and my dad simply answered, *"Then I'm glad I'm here. Tell me what we've got, and let's see what I can do to fix it."*

The thing I remember most clearly about that moment was how the customer's annoyance went away. He seemed to take immediate comfort in the presence of the person who could solve his problem—and who showed interest in doing just that!

After my dad was finished inside (I have a more vague memory of him talking to three or four different people in that office and making a number of phone calls, and everybody seeming quite satisfied with the results of all that activity) we went out to the car, and he explained to me the real significance of what I'd just seen.

"You make a lot of promises when you're selling," he said, *"and sometimes things don't go they way they should, or the way you planned them. But you shouldn't be afraid of those situations, or look at them just as problems. You should look at them as opportunities to prove that you're willing to keep all those promises you've been making, and live up to the trust people put in you."*

Basic Principle

Like so many other things in business, this is a pretty basic principle. But in my own experience, both as a consultant and as a consumer, it's a principle that's pretty often ignored. I've found that it's far more common in business today to find a measure of skepticism, defensiveness, lack of interest or caring, or even outright hostility when you call a problem to the attention of a supplier.

And quick printers aren't guiltless. I hear stories from printing buyers—and from some of the printers I work with and talk to—that simply horrify me. Just a week or so ago, a quick printer seemingly proudly told me how he'd chased a customer out of his shop because the customer had complained about a missed delivery commitment.

"The guy's a real jerk," the printer told me, *"and I don't need his business. Besides, we were only late by one day!"*

Now you may be thinking that there's more to the story. The customer may have been abusive, and that may have been a good reason to chase him out of the store. But that's not the message I felt from the printer telling the story. The message was that being "only late by one day" shouldn't be enough of a problem for a customer to complain about.

Damage Control

Your foremost objective whenever a problem arises with a customer is to keep the customer. I think losing an established customer because of a quality or service failure is about the worst thing that could happen to a quick printer. Customers aren't all that easy to get, especially the good ones.

Here's another important factor, though...you also have to be concerned with the cost of keeping the customer. Because there's likely to be a cost involved in making a problem right. I'm not saying that you shouldn't do whatever it takes to make a customer happy in a problem situation—especially if it's one of your best and most important customers. What I'm saying is that you don't want to "spend" any more than you have to in order to solve the problem and keep the customer. I'm not in favor of routinely making the "grand gesture" and simply not charging for a job....unless that's absolutely necessary. (I'm also not in favor of the tactic of offering a discount on a poorly done job, and I'll get to that in a moment.)

Simple Question

I've found that one of the most powerful problem solving tools available to you is a simple question...what will it take to make this situation right and keep you doing business with me? As with most of the rest of the selling challenge, the secret to this type of problem-solving is honest and open communication.

It's been my experience—and the experience of many other salespeople and business owners—that when you reach out to the customer with the opportunity for them to tell you exactly what they want, what they ask for is often more reasonable (and less expensive for you) than it would have been if the situation were allowed to become adversarial.

(A friend of mine once voiced the opinion that it's not good to seem to be too good at this kind of problem solving. It might make people think you've had a lot of practice at it, he said. There may be some truth in that, and I never wanted people to feel that the organizations I was involved with were used to having problems and unhappy customers. So I often preceded the "what will it take" question by saying something like: *"We don't make many mistakes, but the ones we do make sure seem to be big ones, I'm sorry we made one on you."*)

Discount Vs. Rerun

As I just said, I don't like the idea of "backing out" from a quality problem by offering a discount on a poorly done job. To my mind, a print job is either good enough for the customer to use, or it's not. If faced with a job that's not good enough, I think the best thing for you to do is rerun it and get it right. In fact, what I would hope your customer would say to you in answer to your question is to "run it again and get it right!" Because, having demonstrated that you're capable of less-than-acceptable quality, I think it's critical that you now demonstrate that you can do the job to the customer's highest expectations.

If you put a customer in a position where he or she has to use something that's not really good enough just because of time considerations, maybe that is a situation where you shouldn't charge for the job. I guess what I'm saying is that in this situation, I favor the "all-or-nothing" approach.

By the way, here's another part of my prejudice against the discount tactic...it sometimes creates a monster you'll have to deal with long after the first real problem. I've seen more than a few cases where a customer willl start to look for minor imperfections on every job in the hope of lowering your prices "after-the-fact."

A Great Example

I recently experienced a quality/service failure on the part of one of my favorite suppliers. In fact, it was the way they handled the situation that provided me with the stimulus to write this article. What happened was that United Airlines misplaced one of our bags on our recent "working vacation" trip to Australia. My wife and daughter and I arrived in Sydney, but the bag that held all of their clothes had taken a different trip entirely.

The first part of handling the problem well happened right at the point of contact. One of the flight attendants came to our seats as we were taxiing to the gate and told us that the baggage agent would be waiting for us when we cleared customs. She didn't know precisely what the problem was at that point, but she assured us we'd be in good hands.

United's baggage agent on duty in Sydney that day was a man named Harry Culff. He met us as promised, told us what had happened, told us how sorry he was, and outlined our options for us. The bottom line was that my wife and daughter would be without their things for at least a day.

After discussing the options, we made arrangements for the bag to be sent to the hotel we'd be arriving at two days later, and Mr. Culff gave us an authorization to buy some replacement clothing and other necessities.

The bag was at the hotel when we arrived, and when we got back home, I sent United the receipts for the things we'd bought. A couple of weeks later, this letter arrived:

Dear Mr. Fellman:

Thank you for letting us know about the expenses you incurred due to the temporary loss of your wife and daughter's property. On behalf of United Airlines, I apologize for the inconvenience this incident has caused you.

We are continually working to determine how we can improve our service and minimize mishandlings. Situations such as this are no more acceptable to us than they are to our customers.

Our corporate interim expense policy allows us to consider up to 50% of your documented expenses for reimbursement. However, after reviewing the details of your claim, we have made an exception and issued full payment. Our check will be mailed shortly.

We were very pleased to learn that Mr. Culff was especially attentive to your situation. We will see that your comments are brought to his manager's attention so that proper recognition can be given.

We appreciate your patience and cooperation. You are an important customer to us and we look forward to serving you again soon.
Sincerely,

Carol Thompson
Central Baggage Specialist.

I hope you'll see the same things I saw when I first read this letter. To my mind, it's nothing short of a great example of the "Art of Apology." Ms. Thompson wrote to me from the perspective of an organization that is confident in it's systems (in truth, isn't it amazing that any baggage gets where it's supposed to go?), but understands that each failure of the system inconveniences an individual customer. In this single short letter, she apologized for her company's quality/service failure, let me know that her company cares about such things, let me know that the compensation I was expecting for that failure was on the way, told me clearly that she and her company value my business, and asked me to keep giving it to them!

I liked the letter so much that I called United Airlines and asked them if I could reprint it for you. Maybe it will serve as a guideline for a letter you might have to write someday. But I hope you'll see this too...the whole problem was really solved at the point of contact by a capable customer service person. United wasn't satisfied with that, though, and the "extra step" this letter represents further reinforced their interest in me as a customer.

Many Lessons

I think there are a number of lessons for you in what you've just read. First, face right up to any problems you create. It may not be an enjoyable process, but you can gain more from doing the right thing when faced with a problem than you can from doing twenty jobs right! And you can often "defuse" a situation by making it clear to the customer immediately that you're interested in getting the problem solved.

Next, don't be afraid to "apologize with confidence." Take a lesson from Ms. Thompson who apologized and asked to keep my business in the same short letter. And don't be afraid to let your customer help you to determine what it will take to solve the problem. That can help you to be sure that you end up with a satisfied customer, and can also help you to manage the cost of customer satisfaction.

Finally, give some though to taking the "extra step" of writing a follow-up letter. That provides an opportunity to reinforce your concern with total quality, and even more importantly, your concern for the individual customer on the other side of the problem.

No one wants the kind of problems that result from quality or service failures. But remember the next time that Mr. Murphy jumps up and bites you on the nose, that you can often turn those problems to your advantage...if you do the right things!