

Are We Looking For Closers Or Openers?

One of my “selling owner” Sales Coaching clients made an interesting observation today. “I don’t think I’m very good at closing the sale,” he said, “but I seem to be doing OK at opening accounts.” As soon as I heard those words, I realized that my client had drawn an important distinction between selling printing and selling a lot of other products and/or services. You hear a lot of talk about “closing techniques” on the sales training circuit, but we don’t need them in the printing industry—at least not in the traditional sense. What we really need are *opening* techniques, strategies and skills.

Defining The Sale

OK, let’s start this discussion by looking forward in the selling cycle to what all printers want to end up with—regular customers who phone, fax, e-mail, visit the website/portal or just walk into the shop whenever they need to place an order. How much “selling” really goes on at that stage of the relationship? If we define “selling” as the process of evaluating their needs on a particular project, making relevant suggestions, quoting a price and eventually writing the order, yeah, quite a bit of selling might be going on. I’m not sure that’s the best definition, though.

How about this definition...the most important “sale” that gets made in printing is the one that convinces the prospect to give you that first job, and even that is not a matter of “selling” that print job. What you’re really selling is that idea that you can meet their needs and their expectations—or to put it another way, that they should stop buying from the other guy and start buying from you!

Once you make that sale, you have “opened” an account, and if you provide your new customer with a satisfactory buying experience—a level of quality, service and “ease-of-doing-business-with” that reflects value in their minds—the chances are pretty good that you’ll have the opportunity to maintain and even grow the account.

Account Management

I wrote not too long ago about the trend toward “account managers” rather than salespeople in the quick/digital/small commercial segment of the printing industry. The main point of that column (*QP/October 2002*) was that training and accountability are the keys to success, no matter what you may call the people who deal with your prospects and customers. It’s worth considering, though, that there might not be an adequate number of accounts to manage unless someone is actively involved in opening them. Granted, there always seem to be customers who find their way to a printer, rather than the other way around, but in our current troubled economic times, the printer who wants or needs to grow but waits for new customers to walk in the door is unlikely to see the kind of growth he/she is hoping for.

Direct mail can be an opening strategy, but you have to remember that it works best when there’s also somebody in the loop to close the sale. The same thing is true of the Yellow Pages. When typical examples of any of these advertising media are working, they create *inquiries*, which still need to be turned into orders. Again, the “sale” to be closed is simply the idea that you can meet their needs and their expectations on the project they’re inquiring about.

In most companies, an “account manager” is expected to increase sales volume in two ways—although the priorities will vary from company to company. One opportunity for growth is to develop new customers. The other is to identify and capture new product and/or service opportunities with existing customers.

I think both of these are “opening” processes, especially the strategy of identifying and capturing new opportunities with current customers. The best technique is to open new topics of discussion with current contacts, and new avenues to discussion with other buyers and influencers within the account.

The strategy of opening new topics of discussion can be played two ways. One possibility—probably the most common approach—is to ask an open-ended question: “What other printing are you buying?” A better approach, I think, is to make a list of the products or services this person is buying from you and compare that to your overall product line. That will show you what this customer is *not* buying from you, and prepare you for a different conversation. “I’ve been looking back over your purchases from us,” you might say, “and I’ve seen that you buy a lot of X from us, but you’ve never bought any Y. Can we talk about Y today? Do you have a need for Y that you’ve been meeting through another printing company? Did you know that we produce a lot of Y for other customers every day?”

The strategy of opening new avenues to discussion can also be played two ways. The most common approach seems to be another open-ended question: “Is there anyone else here who buys printing?” A better approach, I think, would be to recognize that certain “titles” seems to be good prospects for a quick/digital/small commercial printer’s

products and services—for example, Office Managers, Marketing Managers and HR Managers. Then, instead of asking a general question that your contact might not be able to answer, you're asking a much more direct question—"Who's in charge of Human Resources here?"—that might very well open a direct pathway to another buyer of your products and/or services. Remember, not everyone knows everything that goes on inside his/her company.

Opening Accounts

The real meat of the process of opening a new account starts in about the same place—identifying a person with decision-making authority or influence within a company which seems to have need for your kind of printing. (Another consideration, of course, is that there must be enough need within the company to make it an attractive prospect.)

Please note my use of the word "it"—reflecting the understanding that you don't sell to companies, you sell to *people* within those companies. As I've written before, a company may have printing needs, but it doesn't have any feelings, and the account opening process is really all about developing those feelings. The buyers has to like you, but more importantly, he/she has to trust you. Remember, what you're really selling is that idea that you can meet their needs and their expectations better than the printer(s) they're dealing with now.

Remember too that you can't offer your ability to meet their needs and expectations as a *fact* in the early stages of a relationship, only as an *opinion*. Granted, you can show samples and talk about quality control and provide testimonials which support your opinion, but you have to understand that every printing order is an act of trust and confidence on the part of the buyer. Your current customers continue to buy from you because they have that trust and confidence. Your prospects will only buy from you if they develop enough trust and confidence in your ability to meet their needs and their expectations.

What that means is simply that the major challenge in opening an account is to build the necessary level of trust and confidence. And please not the difference between "build" and "develop"—most printing sales underachievers sort of hang around with prospects and hope a relationship develops. Top achievers make it their business to build trust and confidence.

T&C Builders

How do they do that? Rule #1 is to always look, act and sound like you can be trusted. A quick/digital/small commercial printing salesperson doesn't have to wear Armani, but he/she does have to "dress for success." Casual may still be OK—especially considering that many prospects and customers dress casually at work themselves—but there can be a fine line between business casual and too casual for business! Acting like you can be trusted includes returning phone calls promptly, showing up on time for meetings, and keeping every promise that you make. Sounding like you can be trusted includes knowing your business—a very solid level of product knowledge!—and making a serious attempt to learn about their business. In selling, you often build more trust when you're listening than when you're talking!

Let's go back to the idea of keeping every promise that you make. It's always been interesting to me that many salespeople try very hard to avoid making promises—for fear of being trapped, I guess. Their basic strategy seems to be built around the avoidance of looking bad. Experience has shown, though, that in this part of the selling process, you have to risk looking bad in order to look good. (Please note that I'm not talking about dressing for success anymore, I'm talking about building trust and confidence by making promises and then keeping them!)

There are usually plenty of opportunities to make promises and then keep them during the early stages of a printing sales relationship. I teach a prospecting/follow up strategy that includes the use of an introductory letter, and the letter itself includes a promise to follow up with a phone call to set up an appointment. You make that call and it keeps a promise. As noted earlier, showing up on time for the appointment represents another promise kept. The meeting itself will almost certainly generate at least more opportunities to make promises and then keep them—perhaps a quote opportunity, or setting up the next contact, or maybe some piece of information that you didn't have at your fingertips, but you promise to get it and get back to the prospect within a specific period of time.

I teach my sales coaching clients to proactively seek out opportunities to make "small promises" during the early stages of the selling process, because keeping those promises makes it easier for the prospect to believe the "big promise" when it comes. That "big promise," as I've written before, goes like this: "If you give me your business, I'll meet your needs and your expectations, and you'll be happy."

Opening and Closing

When it's done well, the opening process sometimes flows directly into the closing of the sale—and remember, the sale we're talking about is not just that first job, it's the idea that you can and will meet those needs and expectations. I've had salespeople tell me that everything flowed so smoothly with certain accounts that it never

really felt like they were selling at all. Whenever I hear something like that, I think the salesperson must have been selling so effectively that it never seemed like he/she had to push for the business.

Sometimes you do have to push, though, because even a good opening strategy doesn't guarantee that you'll close the sale. I wrote on that topic in my January column, titled "You Have To PUSH For Increased Sales," and that column might be a good refresher for you right now. If you don't save all of your past issues of *QP*, you can find it in the article archives at my website: www.davefellman.com.