

A Few Of The Do's And Don'ts Of Sales Management

I'm still troubled by the high rate of failure among outside salespeople in the quick printing industry. Yes, it's hard to find people with solid selling experience, especially at the lower ranges of the compensation scale. But there are plenty of people in this world—especially young people with fairly modest compensation requirements—who are affordable, trainable, manageable and therefore fully capable of becoming successful at an endeavor that shouldn't be confused with brain surgery in terms of its complexity.

So why the high failure rate? Mostly because there's not a lot of sales management going on in this segment of the printing industry. And the lack of management dooms most outside sales efforts to failure—or at least guarantees that far too many quick printing salespeople will languish as underachievers until either the owner or the salesperson gets fed up and pulls the plug on the relationship.

Sales management isn't brain surgery either, folks. Like many other business activities, doing it well starts with gaining an understanding of the basic issues. So let's look at a few of the fundamental do's and don'ts of sales management.

The "Do" List

DO hire patiently and carefully! Effective sales management is a combination of four separate yet interrelated management activities: hiring, training, day-to-day supervision, and motivation. Many outside sales efforts are doomed from the very beginning because an unsuitable person was hired for the job.

What makes a person suitable for a quick printing sales position? At the absolute core of the equation, a salesperson has to be willing and able to do two things: work hard and learn your business. The next critical factor is to be willing and able to live and work within a compensation range you're able to afford. The bottom line here is that you have to be looking for a bright person who really understands that success is going to involve a great deal of effort. As I said before, selling isn't brain surgery, but it might be fair to compare it to high-energy physics! When you get enough molecules bouncing around—cold calls, sales letters, phone calls and face-to-face appointments—you're going to develop some orders and some solid customers.

Don't just hire someone who "looks" good. Make sure there's substance behind appearance. How do you do this? Part of the secret is never to hire a sales candidate before you've had at least three conversations with that person, and at least three more with former employers, co-workers, and if possible, even former customers. Another part of the secret is to test any sales candidate before hiring. Remember that a resume only tells part of the story. You need more than a listing of previous experience to make an informed decision about a sales candidate. You really need to know about attitudes and native intelligence. So take your time and do it right!

DO set meaningful and measurable objectives. Economic factors dictate that the best candidate for most quick printers will be a relatively young person, without a great deal of working and/or selling experience. What sense does it make to let such a person set up his/her own objectives?

Another important consideration is that "action" is more meaningful than sales volume in the early stages of a salesperson's development, because "action"—cold calls, sales letters, phone calls and face-to-face appointments—leads to sales volume. Most inexperienced salespeople won't know how much "action" is enough to insure success. I teach printshop owners/sales managers to establish a set of "action standards" for each salesperson. Experience has shown that there are plenty of people who will work hard enough to succeed, as long as they know exactly how hard that is!

DO enforce accountability. Action standards are meaningless if you don't hold a salesperson accountable for reaching them. Psychologist B.F. Skinner demonstrated many years ago that any behavior which is rewarded will likely be repeated. The other side of that coin is that any unwanted behavior which is not acted upon quickly and consistently will also likely be repeated. "Training" a salesperson goes well beyond simply passing along product knowledge; it also involves developing good working habits. Effective sales management requires that you go beyond "I'd like you to do this" and establish that "I expect you to do this, and you will be held accountable."

DO support and reward. Every salesperson needs support, ranging from "coaching" and occasional hand-holding all the way up to ensuring that the promises a salesperson has to make in order to gain business are kept by the production side of your business. (If your salesperson makes excessive promises, handle that as a training issue, where the objective is to learn from every mistake.) And don't forget the front side of the accountability coin. Reward the behavior you wish to see repeated; the power of simply saying "good job" when it's appropriate can't be overstated. A well-designed compensation plan will provide a significant part of the reward for success, but

remember there's often a sizable time gap between doing something right in the selling process and actually getting paid for it.

The "Don't" List

DON'T shortcut internal training. The "typical" quick printer starts training a salesperson by sending him/her back to work in the shop for a week or more. That might mean a day or so working in bindery, along with time spent observing other functions. Believe me, if you've hired the right person, he/she will be able to learn everything a salesperson needs to know about bindery operations in about 30 minutes. "Hands-on" experience in the bindery is a waste of time, and for the most part, so is observing other production workers at their jobs.

A salesperson needs to know how the ink or toner gets on the paper, the capabilities of your equipment (and therefore what kind of print jobs you're best equipped for), the bindery processes available (and how to tell which one is best for a particular application), the software you support (and how files should be saved and transported to your system.) Don't send your new salespeople out to "work with" other employees unless those employees are fully capable of explaining these things, along with all of the other elements of product and operational knowledge. Then remember that not everything is going to sink in at one time. That 30 minutes I referred to earlier might evolve as a 20 minute explanatory tour of the bindery area—led by you, the sales manager—followed at some later time by a couple of 5 minute conversations as specific issues arise.

The right way to train a salesperson is to establish a curriculum; a list of the things you consider important, and then a plan for imparting this knowledge within a defined period of time. You start off each training day by telling the salesperson "this is what we want to cover today." You end each day with a "de-briefing" to make sure that you reached that objective.

And then you remember that training never stops! One of my favorite strategies is to ask salespeople this question every day through at least the first six months on the job: "What did you learn about printing/copying/our business today?"

DON'T "give" a new salesperson old, inactive customers. Or if you do, make sure that neither of you expects too much to happen with those dead accounts. This is another very common sales management mistake, which only serves to demotivate a salesperson. In theory, these inactive accounts might seem to represent a fairly good source of business, but in practice, they usually stopped doing business with you for a reason. The single fact that a new salesperson is assigned to their account is really not very likely to change their minds.

Another "don't" is to put too much faith in the idea that a salesperson will create immediate growth with "undersold" customers. Yes, these may be people who know your company and have established a willingness to do at least some business with you, but they also have current suppliers for whatever printing and copying they're not buying from you. Your salesperson still has to establish a personal relationship, and provide these customers with compelling reasons to stop buying from the other guys in order to start buying more from you. That can certainly happen over time, but it's not a very realistic expectation in the short term.

DON'T burden a salesperson with non-sales activities. I devoted an entire column to this topic a couple of months ago, but the advice still bears repeating. Time is a finite resource to a salesperson, and when work time is spent on non-sales activities, it can only mean that less time will be available for prospecting, communication, convincing...in other words, selling! Remember that even talented and hardworking salespeople will occasionally suffer bouts of low confidence and call reluctance. You lose something if you give your salesperson an "out" from the highest priority—yet most difficult—selling activities.

DON'T confuse and/or change the rules. I make this statement with one important caveat: if you're not getting solid performance from a salesperson, give some thought to a more appropriate sales management strategy, and then change the rules...once! After that, it's important that there be consistency in both your expectations and in the way that you manage. That means consistency in both censure and reward. This is a consideration of leadership rather than simply management. It's been said that any idiot can be a manager; that's only a matter of a title. Leadership is a little bit more complicated, but it's probably the single most important sales management skill. Leaders develop a vision and stick to it, they don't change course and strategy every week. That's what you want to establish as a sales manager.

Bottom Line

On one hand, it's not brain surgery. On the other hand, it sure does seem difficult for most quick printers to get it right. I'm not trying to tell you that sales management won't always be a difficult challenge. As long as there are salespeople involved, it certainly will be! But I hope these thoughts will help you to better understand a few of the fundamental issues, and perhaps to start changing your sales management strategy accordingly.