

Easy As 1-2-3

A couple of months ago, my article in *QP* discussed *rhythm* in selling. I told you that you have to take a longer view of the selling situation than most printers take. This is not a business where you go out on cold calls and bring back fully developed customer relationships. It takes time—and regular contact—to turn raw prospects into customers.

I spoke in that article about *getting to six*, quoting a statistic that 82% of all first orders come on or after the sixth sales contact on that customer. That doesn't necessarily mean six face-to-face sales calls, telephone and mail contact can play a very important part in *getting to six*. But ultimately, you're going to have to see most sellable prospects at least a couple of times in this process. And in the article, I spoke about the need to have something fresh and interesting to say each time you go face-to-face with a prospect.

So the question for many quick printers and quick printing salespeople becomes *what do I say* on all of these sales calls? It's a good question, and that's why I've made it my topic for today.

Limited Objectives

One of the most common mistakes I find among all kinds of salespeople is to try to accomplish too much on the first face-to-face sales call. I keep hearing printers try to sell the whole shop in one conversation. First of all, it's unreasonable to expect that you could cover all of that ground adequately within the time that most buyers are likely to give you. Secondly, you still have to get to six!

The combination of these two factors should help you to understand that you should limit your objectives for each individual sales call. My advice is to develop a plan for a series of individual sales calls, each with its own specific agenda, that will eventually get all of your key points across, *and* allow you the opportunity to build on the personal relationship that is the heart of most successful sales relationships.

How many individual calls should you develop? I think three is the right number. One to find out about the prospect. A second one to tell the prospect about you. And a third to show the prospect why he or she should buy from you.

Will every prospect be a customer by the end of these three calls? Of course not. Some will never become customers, and some might require ten visits to bring them around. And ten calls on a particular prospect might not be very effective use of your selling time. By the time you've completed three calls, though, you should have enough experience with any individual prospect to decide if you should keep on trying.

First Call

In my opinion, on the "perfect" first call, you'd spend 100% of the time talking about the prospect and the prospect's business. That runs counter to what most quick printers seem to believe, but it's very consistent with consultive selling practices which are paying big dividends in many industries, including big-press commercial printing.

The best known technique to accomplish the "perfect" first call is to ask a lot of questions. Obviously, the right questions will keep the prospect talking, and you'll learn what you want to know. And what I would want to know is what sort of printing needs they have here, and what factors might make them dump the printer they're already doing business with and give the business to me.

Here's something I believe in very strongly. If you ask the right questions, you can learn *two* things from almost any prospect. You can learn what the prospect wants and needs. And, you can learn exactly how to sell it to him. Most prospects will tell you what their hot buttons are if you'll only listen closely enough.

I don't usually start out with questions on a first call, though. I've had a lot of success with a technique I call "turning in your homework." I like to start out by telling a prospect what I know about his or her company. (And, of course, I make it my business to know enough about this company to get the conversation started. That's what I mean by *homework*.)

I think you'll find that people are generally impressed when you take the time to prepare yourself by learning something about them. That gets you off to the all-important good start. Then you can ask questions to confirm your understanding of the situation, and to see what else you can learn.

When you've asked all of your questions, I think you'll give most buyers a big surprise when you close up your notebook and say something like, "*Well, I've learned everything I hoped to learn today, and I think it will be worthwhile to both of us to talk again. I'd like to come back again in a week or so and tell you a little bit about my*

company, and how I think we can be really valuable to you. Can we make an appointment now, or would it be better if I called you at the beginning of next week?"

Think about how you might respond if one of the many salespeople who call on you employed this technique. I think you'll agree that most buyers expect the salespitch to follow hard after the questions, if it doesn't come even before any questions get asked! In my experience, the mere fact that you don't make that salespitch makes many prospects much more interested in hearing it.

Second Call

In the second call in this sequence I envision, you try to do most of the talking. This is where you tell the prospect about yourself and your company. But don't forget that everything you say has to relate somehow to this prospect or prospect company, otherwise it won't have any real meaning to the person you're talking to.

I think that the best way to start this second meeting is to review the first one. Tell the prospect what you think you learned in your last conversation. Remind him of some of the questions you asked, and the answers you were given. Then, it's a good idea to ask one more question to confirm what you think you heard before you go off talking about yourself and your company.

Tell the prospect things like where your shop is located, how long you've been in business, how many employees you have, even how much volume you do. What you want to accomplish is to build the foundation that you represent a tangible, stable company. If you're part of a franchise, talk about that as well. I've always been surprised at how few quick printing franchisees seem to make it their business to gain all of the value they can get from a recognizable "brand name." If you're an NAQP member—franchisee or independent—make that part of your presentation.

Talk about your capabilities, especially the ones which match up well to the prospects specific needs. A prospect who regularly has to duplicate complex manuals needs to know if you have exactly the right piece of equipment for that job. The same holds true for any other equipment-specific situation.

Talk about the state of training and "people capability" at your shop. The fact that you have a typesetter with a graphic arts degree or a press operator with ten years of experience in your shop might be important to me as a buyer.

That's the bottom line...ask yourself what things are important for a prospect to know about you and your company. Then design a presentation that will get that information across. It's the same process you'd—hopefully—use in designing a "corporate brochure," and that's an excellent idea too. Don't fall into the trap, though, of expecting a brochure like that to stand alone. You'll get a lot more impact by telling someone about yourself and your company in person, and leaving the brochure behind as reinforcement.

Ask For The "Order"

Some prospects will never buy from you, but by the same token, with some of them you won't have to get all the way to six! By the time you've completed this second-call presentation, you may actually have convinced some prospects to give you a chance. It's completely appropriate to ask before you leave, maybe simply to say "Have I convinced you that I should be your printer?" If the answer is yes, you don't have to schedule another selling presentation. You may only need to set up a regular cycle of contact, to be sure that you remain at the front of the prospect's mind when the next print job comes around.

If the answer is no, the reasons behind that no are the key to what you should say on the third call in the sequence. And you won't know those reasons unless you ask the hard question at this point...what are the objections that I have to deal with before you will decide to give me your business?

I would listen to those objections, and perhaps ask questions to clarify them, but I wouldn't try to handle those objections on that day. I'd say something to the effect of *"I'd like to thank over what you've said for a few days, and then come back with some specific information that addresses your concerns. I'll call you at the beginning of next week to make one more appointment."*

Third Call

The point of this third call is to show the still unconvinced prospect why he or she should buy from you. And you can only accomplish that by putting the earlier objections to rest. It may be that you have to deal with something that the prospect perceives as a negative about your company. Or it may only be that you just haven't yet given a compelling enough reason to change from the printer this person is already doing business with.

I can't really address a specific objection to something about your company here. There are so many possibilities, and each might require a different tactic. But you can think each individual situation through as it arises, and you can remember and document how you handled it so the next time it arises you'll already have a plan.

I can tell you how I'd prepare for the more general objection, though, the one where you just haven't quite convinced the prospect to change. I'd go after that one with a presentation designed to build up some confidence, and I'd use my relationship with existing customers as the cornerstone of that effort.

I'd start by presenting some samples of work I've done for existing customers, and I hope it's hitting you that I haven't used samples on either of the sales calls that came before this. I consider samples to be a big gun in convincing, so I save them for the situation where I need the most impact.

And I wouldn't be using these samples just as an attempt to demonstrate quality as so many printers do. The most important thing I want the prospect to see on each of these samples is the name of the company I printed them for. And in preparing for this, I'd have chosen samples of work done for customers whose names will mean something.

If there's a story behind the samples, I would tell that too. Especially if it's a story that includes some special level of service on my part. And *especially* if it's a story that's supported by a nice little testimonial letter directly from the customer. I would choose a dull looking sample with a testimonial letter behind it any day over something flashy that only indicates printing capability.

I'd hit on quality, too. But not in the way most printers do. Most printers just hand out their beautiful samples in the expectation that there's an automatic appreciation for the quality. In all seriousness, don't you think most printing buyers know that these samples are hand-picked from the best work the printer's ever done?

There is a way to use samples to illustrate consistent, everyday quality, though, and that's to focus not on quality but on quality control. I'd have a document with me on this third face-to-face sales call that defined my company's quality control procedures. And after showing the samples, I'd hand that document over while I said something like *"I know that you know that I hand-pick these samples, and that there's no direct relationship between samples and a printer's everyday quality. But here is how we guarantee that every job we print for you will look every bit as good as these hand-picked samples."*

Closing

When you've completed your third-call presentation, it's time to ask for the "order" again...the commitment to buy from you! And if you don't get that commitment—or at least something indicating that you're getting strong consideration that may ultimately turn into the commitment you want—you have to ask yourself if it will be worth the effort to continue with this prospect.

Quick printers are constantly telling me that it's hard to find the time to get out and sell. That makes it all the more important not to waste your selling time on someone who's unlikely to be convinced to buy from you. I'm willing to "invest" three sales calls on almost any prospect that I know has enough printing business to make gaining them as a customer worthwhile. But I'm not willing to "invest" my selling time beyond that unless I see a specific reason to do so.

That's not to say that I wouldn't keep one of these prospects on my mailing list after an unsuccessful three call sequence. I think that's an excellent way to build a little hedge on your investment, and there have been a few times in my career where I got a "delayed reaction" and gained a customer that I had pretty much written off as a prospect.

Summary

The total selling challenge is really a collection of smaller challenges...figuring out who has the business to give, getting them initially interested in you, getting them to see you on an appointment, giving them reasons to buy from you, handling any objections, getting to six! The printers who really succeed in their selling efforts are the ones who recognize all of this, and have a plan to meet each challenge.

In my experience, the biggest obstacle printers create for themselves in face-to-face selling is to try to cover too much too fast. So slow it down! By planning to cover the important issues in smaller chunks—and over a longer period of time—you'll make it easier on yourself to get all of the important points across.

And, you're going to find that you're making it easier for your prospects too. Easier for them to understand what you're all about. Easier to get to know you and like you. Easier to decide that you're dependable, and that you may very well be the best printer around. Easier to trust you with their work!