

Reciprocity

I received two particularly interesting e-mails this week. One came from a client who wanted my thoughts on a letter he was planning to send to one of his suppliers. To summarize the situation, my client wanted to comment on the fact that the supplier hadn't returned several phone calls he'd made to try to set up a meeting to discuss this heating and air conditioning company's printing needs. Beyond that, the supplier hadn't been doing a very good job of servicing my client's HVAC needs. "I could live with you not wanting to buy your printing from me if you were doing a good job on what I buy from you," my client wrote. "But if I can't get any satisfaction from you in either regard, I'm going to find another supplier. I'm sure that I can at least find someone who'll do a good job taking care of my (heating and air conditioning) system."

The second e-mail came from a Canadian printer. "I want to put a marketing program together to get some business from the people I give business to," he wrote. "I'm hoping that you've written an article on this subject that I can read."

Well, I haven't, but since *reciprocity* seems to be on more than one printer's mind, it seems like a pretty good idea!

You Scratch My Back...

Reciprocity has long been one of the guiding principles of commerce. As the old saying goes: "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours!" In a perfect world, a perfect "balance of trade" could exist, but we all know that we don't operate in a perfect world.

Still, though, it's fair to expect that someone you spend money with should at least be willing to *talk* about spending money with you. That's why I wholeheartedly endorsed the letter my client wanted to send. (That and the fact that it's just plain dumb to keep buying from someone who isn't meeting your needs!)

I think part of the reason that printers often don't get a desirable balance of trade with their customers is that human nature leads us to buy from who we *want* to buy from, not who we *have* to buy from. Of course, there's probably a "wisdom gap" in not wanting to do business with someone who does business with you. Be that as it may, the other major problem here is simply that most printers don't ask!

If I were you, I'd start thinking about reciprocity and making a list of all of my suppliers, both business and personal. If they buy printing, you have some leverage that can be applied to getting them to buy it from you.

Leverage

Having *leverage* means that you can give them at least a couple of good reasons to buy from you, starting with your *value proposition* (which I hope you'll remember me writing about last month) and extending to the value of the business you do with them. You can't make them buy from you, though, and that's an important understanding—unless, of course, you do enough business with them to make you the proverbial 800 pound gorilla. (Where does an 800 pound gorilla sit? Anywhere he wants to!)

I would direct my first "reciprocity contact" with a supplier to the person I have the most frequent dealings with, probably a salesperson, but also possibly a CSR, a technician, or even a delivery person. "I'd like to explore the possibility of doing the printing for your company," I would say, "and I would appreciate it if you'd ask whoever I need to talk to about that to give me a call. Let me also ask you to call me after you've spoken with the right person, to tell me who that is, and when I might expect to hear from him/her."

If a few days went by without a response, I would call my initial contact person to communicate this message: "I'm surprised and disappointed that I haven't heard back from you regarding my request to talk to the person who handles your printing. Let me make two things clear to you; first, I'm not saying that your company has to buy from me, but you do have to talk to me. If that doesn't happen, I'm probably going to stop buying from you!"

Don't be unpleasant about this. Your attitude should suggest that you're just stating a fact. But remember, you don't really have any leverage without the threat of taking your business elsewhere. Hopefully you won't have to play that card, but it's there if you need it!

Next Level

When you do speak to the person with decision-making authority, I recommend that you start out by trying to soft-pedal the threat. "I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you about your printing," you might say, "and I want to make it clear that I'm not sitting here right now with the attitude that you have to buy from me or else I won't buy

from you. I get value from the money I spend with you, and I'm very confident that you'll get value from any money you spend with me—but the first issue is to talk about your printing needs to see if there's a match between your needs and our capabilities.”

That should lead you into the same sort of needs-assessment conversation you would have with any other prospect, and remember, in addition to a need for your kind of printing, you're also looking for some level of dissatisfaction with the printer-in-place. It's always easier to convince someone to change when he/she is less than fully satisfied with the current supplier.

Closing Question

What you learn through your needs-assessment questioning will tell you what to stress in the presentation stage of the conversation. Ideally, you'll have identified some problems to which you can suggest solutions. If that's the case, your closing question is” Well, it seems like you do have a problem with your current supplier, and I think we have the solution. What do you think?”

The other side of this coin is when they have no overt problems with their current printer. In that case, your closing question is: “Well, it seems like they're doing a pretty good job for you, but let me ask you this. Since we would also do a very good job for you, is there any reason that you wouldn't give us at least some of your printing business?”

It may be that your supplier does have a reason—valid or otherwise—for not giving you at least some of his/her business. For example, the other printer might also be a customer, and maybe even a more important customer than you! If that's the case, you may want to exercise your threat and take your business elsewhere.

On the other hand, I'm not suggesting that you cut off your nose to spite your face in a situation like this. Mostly what I want is for you to ask your suppliers to consider a “reciprocity relationship” which could be a win-win situation for both of your businesses.