

Schrodinger's Cat

Erwin Schrodinger had a cat.

Actually, that may or may not be true. We do know that Schrodinger *imagined* a cat, which had been placed in a box, so it couldn't be seen, and because of that, it couldn't be known if the cat was alive, dead or both.

OK, *both* is unlikely in the world most of us live in, but Schrodinger was conducting a thought experiment in the highly theoretical world of quantum mechanics. He was attempting to describe something called *quantum superposition*, which has nothing to do with printing sales. Schrodinger's cat, though, does have a real application to your business, which could be stated this way:

If you don't know, for sure, that your customer relationships are alive and healthy, they could be alive, or dead, or somewhere in between.

Customer Contact

The issue here is staying in touch with your customers, maintaining an appropriate level of contact. *Appropriate* is a key word, because you can do almost as much damage with too much contact as you can with too little. For each customer, though, there is an appropriate interval.

That might be two weeks, four weeks, twelve weeks or longer. This is partly a function of how much they buy from you, and also how frequently they typically order. The interval should be long enough to avoid smothering them, but short enough to guard against something going wrong and you not finding out about it.

And things can go wrong, right? It's been said that Murphy's Law runs wild in our industry, and that every job that comes into a printshop is an accident looking for a place to happen. The good news is that customers are sometimes forgiving. The bad news is that sometimes they aren't. And the really bad news is that sometimes they don't even tell you they're unhappy, they just start buying from someone else. The best way to avoid that problem is to make sure they get regular opportunities to tell you if there's any weakness in your relationship. That gives you the opportunity to try to solve any problem that arises

Taking The Temperature

When you make one of those interval calls, I strongly recommend that you avoid saying something like: "Hey, we haven't heard from you for a while." I get those calls from my own suppliers, and I often feel like they're accusing me of cheating on them. Beyond that, ask yourself what kind of value that kind of call brings? You can call me every day if every call brings value. Too many calls with too little value takes us into that *smothering* area.

Here's an alternate approach. "Hi Dave, I'm calling to give you the opportunity to complain about the way we've been serving you. And I'm serious, if you have any complaints, I want to hear them. We value your business, and we want to know if we're meeting or exceeding your expectations...or not!"

This is meant to be lighthearted, even though it's very serious, and it's also something that you'd be wise to establish beyond a single phone call. "Let me tell you what I'd like to do moving forward," you might say. "I'd like to call you at some appropriate interval to take the temperature of our relationship. We can use 98.6 degrees as the baseline. If you tell me that's where we are, I'll know that we're healthy. If we're running a fever, though, tell me that so I can treat it!"

Then you might say: "Based on your pattern of ordering, I think every X weeks would be the right interval. What do you think?" Ideally, you'll decide together how to make this work best.

If you don't know, for sure, that your customer relationships are alive and healthy, they could be alive, or dead, or somewhere in between. Real or not, Schrodinger's cat wants to help you to deal with that risk.