

## Are You Really Networking?

One of the printing industry organizations here in the United States did a survey of salespeople recently, and one of the questions was: "How do you find new customers?" The predominant answers were "leads generated by our website" and "referrals."

That tracks pretty well with what I see and hear in the marketplace, but I think there is more to this story. The simple fact is that most printing salespeople are not finding enough new customers. Yes, they are following up on the leads that come in through their websites, but those leads are not an everyday occurrence. Beyond that, most people who contact one printer via the Internet are contacting more than one printer, and as I wrote last month, that will create one winner and multiple losers. Still, I see that too many salespeople are waiting for leads to arrive, and that is the sum total of their "finding new customers" activity. I think you need to be more proactive than that.

As for referrals, they also tend to be reactive situations. It is not a matter of salespeople soliciting and then following up on referrals. It is more a matter of someone else suggesting that the buyer contact the printer, and the printer, via the salesperson, jumping on the opportunity when that happens.

Also interesting to me is that so many salespeople here in the United States belong to networking groups, for the express purpose of generating referrals. In my experience, most of them are not working very hard at it, and I have always said that the most important part of *networking* is the *working* part.

### BNI And Other Networking Groups

I googled "networking groups + Australia" just before I started writing this, and was not too surprised to find BNI at the top of the list. I followed the link and learned that there are more than 200 BNI groups in Australia, and apparently every one of them has a printing salesperson in it. In fact, the BNI website has a "Find A Member/ Specialty" tab, and when I searched on "printing" I came up with 250 results. Some of them were obviously mis-labeled (for example, the young lady who works for Ditto Dancewear), and a few others were what I might call related industries. Still, there are no shortage of printing salespeople in these groups. The question is, are they getting the results they could be/should be getting?

Here is what I have observed of printing salespeople here in the US who belong to BNI or other networking groups. They have some success at what I refer to as Level 1 Networking, but very little at Level 2 and Level 3.

#### Level 2

The core idea behind BNI is that "givers gain." What that means is that BNI members are not just supposed to buy from each other, but rather to refer each other to their own customers. The intent is that I refer you to my customers, you reciprocate, and we both benefit. "Givers gain" is meant to encourage each member to start that process.

Unfortunately, there is a risk attached to this "giving." I have attended many BNI meeting with various clients, and met hundreds of their fellow BNI members, but I have met very few who I would be willing refer to someone I was selling to, or hoping to sell to. The problem is that I questioned their product knowledge, or their commitment to quality and service, or in some cases their ethics and honesty. Think of it this way, when you offer a referral, you stick your neck out at least a little bit. If the person you refer performs well, you look good. If not, there is a real possibility that you look bad.

If I were involved in a BNI group, or any other networking group, my Level 2 goal would be to find one or two people who shared my professionalism, and to establish a "mini-group" within the larger group with just those people. And then I would go beyond referring them to my customers, I would arrange introductions. Why? Because that is what I really want in return.

#### Level 3

The next level in this strategy is to solicit and follow up on referrals from the new customers you develop through your Level 2 networking. And that raises a question. When was the last time you actually asked one of your current customers for a referral? As noted earlier, most of the referral success I hear about is reactive rather than proactive, but there is a huge opportunity here for you to *network* your current customer base.

It can start with a simple question: "Do you know anyone who might have need of my services and be interested in meeting with me?" I think that is a question you should ask every one of your customers, both new and old.

And here is a final thought for today. Referrals are good. Introductions are even better.