

Take Action Now Against A Summer Slump

The “dog days” of summer are just around the corner. That typically means that business will slow down many quick printers, sometimes to a crawl! Many of your customers will be going into “summer mode,” meaning that half of them are on vacation at any given time, and the other half aren’t thinking much about printing. Half of the latter group is staring out their windows looking forward to their own vacations; the other half is inundated with work because they’ve just got back from vacation.

In the past, many quick printers looked forward to the summer as a time to get a break in themselves. Things slowed down, but that was all right. If you’d had a good first half—and if you could expect business to come back strong in the fall—why not relax and enjoy the summer just like so many of your customers.

A Different Situation

Well, that situation has changed for many quick printers. For some of you who are already having a rough year, an even slower summer could be the straw that breaks the printing company’s back. I’ve seen that even the healthy and profitable companies are less tolerant of any seasonal slowdown. When you’ve gone through some pain already to get yourself “lean and mean,” even a short-term drop in sales can be a significant business problem.

So what do you do right now if you’re worried about suffering from a summer slump? I think the question has three possible answers:

- (a) Do a few simple and inexpensive things that will make your business grow over the next few months.
- (b) Look for things—perhaps more things—to cut in order to protect your cash flow.
- (c) Do nothing aside from what you’ve been doing, and hope things will get better.

Action Plans

I don’t think there’s much question of which choice most quick printers would make. So here’s a list of five things that you can do *right now* to help your situation this summer.

1. Go through your customer list and pick three—or more—customers who have not shown themselves to be price sensitive...and add a few percent to every price you quote and charge them. Their orders may be fewer and farther between in the summertime, but you’ll make each one a little bit bigger and a little more profitable. (If you’d lose customers over a 2½-3% price increase—which is all I have in mind—your problems are much worse than just a summer slump. Don’t be afraid of a modest increase, especially on people who haven’t shown themselves to be especially price sensitive.)

2. Identify the customers who make up 80% of your business and try to schedule a “high-level” meeting with each of them. You may not be able to get together with every one of them because of “summer mode,” but you can accomplish a lot with the ones you are able to connect with. Talk about two things: the issues of keeping them happy, and the possibility that they have more business to give you.

Do you think your best customers already give you most of their business because they already know about all of your capabilities? Unless you’re a very rare quick printing sales operation, the chances are extremely good that you’ll hear the words “I didn’t know you could do that” a few times during one of these meetings. Yes, you may be sending out regular direct mail informing these customers of what’s new with your company. You may even be stressing your capabilities on outside sales calls and telephone conversations. Still, the possibility is very good that one of two common situations exists.

First, the things you’ve said may not have sunk in. Frequent repetition is an important element in selling success, especially when you’re selling new products or services. Second is the possibility that things have changed within your customers’ organizations since you told them about new capabilities you’ve developed. Something like mailing services or a state-of-the-art color copier with a computer interface may not have seemed important last year when you first talked to them about it, but now these services or capabilities might be just what they need.

3. For those of you who have outside salespeople, require each of your salespeople to develop a list of 10 “warm” prospects to focus their immediate efforts on. By “warm” I mean people who have shown some interest in doing business with your company. The salesperson should feel that these prospects are close to giving you that first order, and the list should be in rank order, with the prospect most likely to buy first at the top of the list. If you—the owner—represent all or part of your shop’s outside sales effort, you should make this list too.

4. Go after prospect nine and ten on each salesperson’s list with aggressive pricing. I’m not suggesting that you use a low price strategy on the people who you and your salespeople think are most likely to buy anyway,

but aggressive pricing on a few prospects of slightly lower priority can bring immediate and positive results. In fact, if you like the results—or if you still need more business within a short time frame—I might encourage you to apply the same strategy to prospects seven and eight. Don't go farther up the list of prospects, though. Taking on a few low-margin customers is a valid strategy during the summer slump, but I don't want it to become a way of life!

5. Establish a 60 or 90-day sales contest with a significant reward for achievement, but with objectives that are themselves high enough to pay for the rewards if they are met. Your outside and front-counter salespeople may also be in "summer mode." A short-term incentive program like this can help a lot in getting them focused during the slow months. If your salespeople concede the situation, you won't get the results you need.

Take Action!

The final element of this discussion is to commit yourself to *doing* things like this, not just thinking about them! Quick printers are procrastinators, and if you procrastinate too long, one of two things will happen: One is that fall will arrive and business will pick up in a natural seasonal progression. That may make you feel better, but you will not have had as good a summer as you could have had. The other possibility is that business won't come back, and if you don't act now to improve your situation, you could be a lot closer to the edge when the summer ends.

And by the way, for those of you are generally busiest in the summer, I hope you recognize that this article still has value for you. These actions can be taken *whenever* you undergo a seasonal slump—summer, winter, spring or fall—and bring you out stronger on the other side.