

Not Just Another Printing Salesperson

A few months ago, I wrote about *invisibility*, and in the closing paragraphs of that column, I posed a question: If you're a salesperson—or the owner in the sales role—how do you deal with customers who are content to just send in their orders when they need something, and prospects who don't want to spend any time with another printing salesperson?

The answer, I wrote, is both complex and simple, and the simple part is to *not be* just another printing salesperson. That's a simple statement, of course, but it's likely to be complex in execution, so as promised, I'm going to explain how to make a *visibility* strategy work. Because the more time you spend "in front of" customers and prospects, the more business you're likely to do with them.

In Front Of Customers

Let's start with a clear understanding of your *purpose* in staying in front of your customers. Depending on how much of their business you're getting, it slides along a scale that ranges from 100% *defense* to as much as 99% *offense*. (Remember, by the way, that I reserve the term *customer* for someone who is actually buying from you. We'll talk about *prospects* who are not yet buying from you a little farther along.)

Let's say that you're already getting all of Customer A's business. Your challenge with that customer is to defend the relationship against any competitor, and the best strategy for meeting that challenge involves three interlocking lines of defense.

The first line of defense is *customer satisfaction*—meeting and hopefully exceeding their quality and service expectations. The second line of defense is *customer contact*—giving you the opportunity to identify any problems and giving them the opportunity to complain. The third line of defense is your *proaction* or *reaction* to any problems that occur.

Proaction, of course, is when you identify an issue or problem even before they do, and do something about it! That could include fixing the occasional quality or service glitch, and it could also include learning that your customer needs to reduce costs, which might give you the opportunity to put cost-saving ideas on the table before they start looking for lower prices.

So, how do you "sell" the opportunity to get yourself in front of this customer, even if they seem satisfied just to send in their orders when they need something? The key word is *transparency*—which, as you may remember, was my topic back in June, the month before I wrote about *invisibility*. You simply tell them that you think it's important to get face-to-face on a regular basis, and you tell them exactly why. "This is really about customer service and customer satisfaction," you might tell them. "I know I'm getting all of your business. I want to make sure that I continue to earn it and deserve it."

Penetration Plan

Now let's consider Customer B, and let's say that you're only getting 25% of their business. You still have a *defensive* challenge, but you also have the *offensive* challenge of penetrating that account. That might involve *product opportunities*—selling them more of your overall product line. It might also involve *people opportunities*—identifying others within the organization who purchase your products and services. How do you "sell" the opportunity to get yourself in front of this customer?

I still recommend a *transparent* approach, and here's how I think you can differentiate yourself from the printers who are getting the other 75% of this customer's business. "I'd like to do more business with you," you might say, "and I'd also like to stay on top of the business you're already giving me. What I'd like to do is meet with you every month for the next 4 months, and part of the agenda will be to review what you've done with us, to make sure you're completely satisfied. The second part of the agenda will be to talk about what you're working on—not just in terms of printing, but in terms of the overall marketing and operation of your business. The goal of that part of the agenda will be to see if I can come up with any ideas that will help you to market or operate more effectively, and if I do, the third part of the agenda will be for me to explain those ideas."

Your objective, of course, is to position yourself as a *business* resource, not just a printing resource. I hope you'll agree that that would make you much more than just another printing salesperson.

In Front Of Prospects

Now let's look at a prospect. You've made numerous attempts to get yourself in front of this person—mailings and letters and e-mails and phone calls—without any success. Your best strategy now may be... *to give up!*

Whoa, that probably wasn't what you expected to read. Consider this, though, if you've given this individual plenty of chances to respond, and he/she hasn't done that, you might be barking up the wrong tree.

Here's a key question, though: Did you give the prospect *reasons* to respond, or just *chances*? I think there's a very significant difference. "I'd like to talk with you about your printing." is not much of a reason. "I can probably save you money," is more of a reason, but is it compelling enough? If all they care about is price, maybe so, but that raises another important question: Are those the people you really want to meet with?

It's been my observation that a very large percentage of printing salespeople are leading with price these days. Even if you *want* to be one of them, do you think that does much to differentiate you in the marketplace? I think you probably need to come up with a better reason.

So please give some thought to what that might be, and please also give some thought to how you're going to prove it. "I think I can help you to market your business more effectively," might be a good start, but you probably won't be the only printing salesperson saying that.

How about this: "I've been doing this for XX years, and I've learned a lot about what works and what doesn't work, and I'm eager to share some of that knowledge with you. The first step, though, is that we need to talk about your goals and what you've been doing and what you've observed to be working and not working. Let's put our heads together. I think you'll find me to be a great ally in reaching your goals."

Final Thought

Here's a final thought for today. Everyone who buys a significant amount of printing already has a printer. If it's not you already, your challenge is to convince them that you're better than the printer they're using. The first step toward convincing them that you're *better* has to be that you're *different*.

I think that's worth spending some time on, and I hope I've given you a few things to think about today.