

Dealing With Quality And/Or Service Mistakes

It's an unfortunate truth in the printing business that mistakes are going to happen. It's been said that Murphy's Law runs wild in a printshop, and that every job that comes into your shop is an accident looking for a place to happen.

The vast majority of printers strive for quality, and the best ones have established a high level of consistent *total quality*, which means quality of product, service, *and* relationship.

But even for those printers, it seems unavoidable that a bad one gets out of the shop every once in a while. or one goes out later than it was promised. What you do when one of those things happens is a measure of your commitment to *total quality*, and to truly taking care of your customers.

The way I look at it, you make a lot of promises when you're selling, and sometimes things don't go they way they should, or the way you planned them. But you shouldn't be afraid of those situations, or look at them only as problems. I think you should look at them as opportunities to prove that you're willing to *keep* all those promises you've been making, and live up to the trust people put in you.

Basic Principle

Like so many other things in business, this is a pretty basic principle. But in my own experience, both as a consultant and as a consumer, it's a principle that's pretty often ignored. I've found that it's far more common in business today to find a measure of skepticism, defensiveness, lack of interest or caring, or even outright hostility when you call a problem to the attention of a supplier.

And printers aren't guiltless. I hear stories from printing buyers—and from some of the printers I work with and talk to—that absolutely horrify me. Not too long ago, a printer seemingly proudly told me how he'd chased a customer out of his shop because the customer had complained about a missed delivery commitment.

"The guy's a real jerk," the printer told me, "and I don't need his business. Besides, we were only late by one day!"

Now you may be thinking that there's more to the story. The customer may have been abusive, and that may have been a good reason to chase him out of the shop. But that's not the message I felt from the printer telling the story. The message was that being "only late by one day" shouldn't be enough of a problem for a customer to complain about.

Damage Control

Your foremost objective whenever a problem arises with a customer is to *keep the customer*. I think losing an established customer because of a quality or service failure is about the worst thing that could happen to a printer. Customers aren't all that easy to get, especially the good ones.

Here's another important factor, though...you also have to be concerned with the *cost* of keeping the customer. Because there's likely to be a cost involved in making a problem right. I'm not saying that you shouldn't do whatever it takes to make a customer happy in a problem situation—especially if it's one of your best and most important customers. What I'm saying is that you don't want to "spend" any more than you have to in order to solve the problem and keep the customer. I'm not in favor of routinely making the "grand gesture" and simply not charging for a job....unless that's absolutely necessary.

Simple Question

I've found that one of the most powerful problem solving tools available to you is a simple question...*what will it take to make this situation right and keep you doing business with me?* As with most of the rest of the selling challenge, the secret to this type of problem-solving is *honest and open communication*.

It's been my experience—and the experience of many other salespeople and business owners—that when you reach out to the customer with the opportunity for them to tell you exactly what they want, what they ask for is often more reasonable (and less expensive for you) than it would have been if the situation were allowed to become adversarial.

People want to buy from suppliers they trust. Believe me, the core relationship between buyers and sellers is as simple as that. If trust is lost, so is the customer.

No one wants the kind of problems that result from quality or service failures, but an occasional quality or service problem doesn't have to lead to a complete breakdown in trust. The key is to acknowledge any problem immediately, and then work to resolve it.

Your best customers don't expect perfection, especially the ones who have dealt with printing long enough to understand about Murphy's Law. But they do expect you to fix anything that isn't done right the first time.

All Or Nothing

As noted earlier, your foremost objective whenever a problem arises with a customer is to *keep the customer*, but you also have to be concerned with the *cost* of keeping the customer. That can be substantial, especially if it comes down to making the "grand gesture" and simply not charging for a job. But I think that's often a better choice than something that seems to be a very common tactic in the printing industry...offering a discount on a poorly printed job.

I really don't like the idea of "backing out" from a quality or service problem by offering a discount. To my mind, a print job is either good enough for the customer to use, or it's not. If you're faced with a job that's not good enough, I think the best thing for you to do is rerun it and get it right. Because, having demonstrated that you're capable of less-than-acceptable quality, I think it's critical that you now demonstrate that you *can* do the job to the customer's highest expectations.

If your quality or service failure puts a customer in a position where he or she *has to* use something that's not really good enough—because of time considerations, perhaps—maybe that is a situation where you shouldn't charge for the job. I guess what I'm saying is that in this situation, I favor the "all-or-nothing" approach.

And by the way, here's another part of my prejudice against the discount tactic...it sometimes creates a monster you'll have to deal with long after the first real problem. I've seen more than a few cases where a customer will start to look for minor imperfections on every job in the hope of lowering your prices "after-the-fact."

Too Good?

You will face quality and service problems in this business, and it's important to learn how to handle them. But here's something else to think about. A friend of mine once voiced the opinion that it's not good to seem to be *too good* at this kind of problem solving. It might make people think you've had a lot of practice at it, he said.

There may be some truth in that opinion, and I never wanted people to feel that the organizations I was involved with were used to having problems and unhappy customers. So I made it a point to start out a "problem-resolving" conversation by saying something like: "We don't make many mistakes, but the ones we do make sure seem to be big ones, I'm sorry we made one on you."

Guidelines

From what printing customers say, printers in general do not do a very good job of handling problems when they occur. So please consider these guidelines when it happens to you. First, face right up to any problems you create. It may not be an enjoyable process, but you can gain more from doing the right thing when faced with a problem than you can from doing twenty jobs right! And you can often "defuse" a situation by making it clear to the customer immediately that you're interested in getting the problem solved.

Next, don't be afraid to "apologize with confidence." That might reflect a combination of "we don't make many mistakes" and "what will it take to resolve this problem and keep you doing business with me." This strategy can help you to be sure that you end up with a satisfied customer, and can also help you to manage the cost of customer satisfaction.

Finally, give some thought to taking the "extra step" of writing a follow-up letter. In a world where making a phone call is a very easy thing to do, most people feel that taking the time to write a letter reflects a deeper level of commitment. This strategy provides an opportunity to reinforce your concern with total quality, and even more importantly, your concern for the individual customer on the other side of the problem.

No one wants the kind of problems that result from quality or service failures. But remember the next time that Mr. Murphy jumps up and bites you on the nose, that you can often turn those problems to your advantage...if you do the right things!