

Turning Pro

In my recent conversations with graphic arts dealers about the state of the industry's sales force, the two words I've been hearing most often are *professional* and *pro-active*. Unfortunately, it hasn't been people saying "We have a highly professional and pro-active sales force right now in our industry." What I've been hearing is "We have to get more professional, and develop pro-active salespeople, otherwise we're headed for serious trouble."

It's hard to fault that analysis when you hear it so often; when dealers and their customers both tell you that the industry's salespeople are not up to it's current challenges. But how do you make the necessary changes? In fact, *what* are the necessary changes?

In my opinion, three things have to happen to move the dealer sales force in the direction that both dealers and customers want it to go. First, salespeople have to catch up with technology. Second, they have to get organized. And third, they have to be held accountable for their performance.

Technology

The issue of catching up with technology is really an issue of product knowledge, which can be broken down into two categories: *specifications* and *applications*. *Specifications* are the "hardware" of product knowledge: the sizes, configurations, colors, etc. that a product is available in; who makes that odd size that a particular client may need; how many you have to order to get the best price. *Applications* are the "software" of product knowledge: what a particular product is intended to do; what it's really capable of doing; and therefore which is the best product for a particular job.

Specifications define the features of products, but *applications* define the benefits. The true professional salesperson will focus on gaining *applications knowledge*. And that knowledge is out there for the dealer salesperson. It can be gained in two principal ways: talking with people who are actually using the products, and getting their opinion of what works and what doesn't; and talking with the products' manufacturers, but demanding that they go beyond the features of their products to help you and your salespeople clearly understand the applications and benefits.

Organization

Today's graphic arts salesperson has an admittedly difficult time management challenge. Most salespeople feel that their customers are considerably more demanding than they were even a few years ago, which adds to the forces already putting stress on a salesperson's time.

Good TM skills are a must right now, and those skills are founded on the ability to prioritize. In order for a salesperson to reach the highest levels of performance, he or she must be able to determine what's important and what's not, and *pro-actively* keep the important things on the schedule rather than *reactively* having them fall out.

Being *pro-active* means more than just managing time well, though. It also describes an overall attitude toward business. Pro-active salespeople look for opportunities and seize them. They don't just take orders, they sell! There have always been "professionals" and "order-takers" in this business, but I think most graphic arts dealers would agree that there's less room for a marginal performer in their organizations today than there ever was before.

Accountability

Having said that, how can there still be so many underachievers and "less-than-professional" salespeople in this industry? The fault for that lies squarely on the shoulders of the owners and sales managers. If your salespeople aren't doing the job you expect them and need them to do, get rid of them and find people who will!

The best way to measure performance is with a combination of sales quota and what I call "action standards." The quota points out the long-term result you're looking for. In effect, it should say to the salesperson "This is what I expect from you...it's your part of what I want this company to accomplish this year." Action standards provide both a measuring device and the day-to-day framework for turning quota into achievement. Your action standards might require five prospecting letters to be written each week, three "sit-downs" with major customers each month, ten first appointments with potential customers each quarter, etc. What these "action standards" are meant to convey to the salesperson is that "I want to help you succeed, and this is the sort of consistent effort it will take for you to reach your quota."

Bottom Line

By gaining *applications knowledge* and getting better organized, this industry's salespeople can move up to a higher degree of professionalism. And by holding each salesperson accountable for his or her performance, the industry's owners and sales managers will do their part toward creating exactly the kind of pro-active, professional salesforce they've expressed a desire for. It won't happen overnight, but it will happen if the standards are set high enough, and if salespeople and managers alike work hard to make it so.