

Hero Opportunities

Let's be honest. There are plenty of quick printers who can handle the "easy" jobs. The real proof of exceptional performance in this business is how well you handle the "hard" jobs. Of course, that raises a few questions...like what makes them "hard" in the first place; what makes one job "hard" for one printer and "easy" for another one; and finally, whether there's a way to capitalize on the ability to handle those "hard" jobs.

From the sales and marketing perspective, the last question is the most important one. And the answer is yes. There's a great deal of long-term benefit to be found in taking advantage of the "hero opportunities" that occur regularly in the dealings between a quick printer and his or her customers.

All Shapes And Sizes

Customers and their printing and copying projects come in all shapes and sizes, and so do hero opportunities. I've been asking seminar attendees to tell me their "above and beyond the call of duty" stories, and some of the stories I've heard are truly incredible. Quick printers are service oriented, and while the day-to-day level of customer service across the industry might leave something to be desired (and that comes from focus-group study of quick printing customers, not just from me), the stories I hear clearly indicate that many quick printers will go to the wall and beyond for their customers.

Staying up all night to run a job. Driving all night—in a rainstorm/ hailstorm/snowstorm—to make a delivery. Pushing typesetting, proofing, and printing through a ridiculously tight schedule because the customer forgot something important for an upcoming meeting or trade show. You all know the gist of the stories, and many of you have your own versions to tell.

But not all hero opportunities require that level of exertion. Here's one that I was personally involved in recently.

Protecting My Image

In April, I put on a seminar in Phoenix, with the local AWT franchise as the sponsor. My normal procedure in working with sponsors is to send a master copy of my seminar handout to them in advance. The sponsor then duplicates enough copies for the audience we expect, and brings them to the seminar site.

In early March, I got a phone call from Laura Nelson, who owns the Phoenix AWT along with her husband Frank. Laura let me know that she'd found three typos in my handout master, and asked me if I'd like her to make the corrections. She was really surprised when I said no.

Why would I say no? Because those particular typos are in the handout by design, for the specific purpose of pointing out this very significant hero opportunity. Without fail, someone in each seminar will point the typos out to me, and I'll use them to drive my point home.

What's the point? As a seminar presenter, I'm supposed to be an expert, right? I'm supposed to have all the answers. But how much confidence can people have in a seminar presenter who can't even get his own handout materials right. Or as I say in the seminar, how much "respect" can you have for someone who can't even spell the word.

Here's the punchline of this particular story. In the 3+ years that I've been putting on the Building Sales Inside The Printshop seminar, I have worked with probably 25 different sponsors. In that same timeframe, two other printshops/ copyshops have duplicated the handouts for seminars I promote myself. Of all of the people who've handled my originals, only Laura Nelson of AWT in Phoenix, AZ caught my mistakes, and called them to my attention before then became "mass produced" mistakes.

Now in this particular case, Laura caught typos that were there by design. But what if that weren't the case? What if they were truly mistakes. Would I be mad at her for catching them and calling them to my attention? Not likely! I think I'd be thrilled that my supplier kept me from looking bad. And I think I'd remember that service whenever Laura's competitors came by asking for my business.

Responsibility

Now, I can hear some of you saying to yourselves, "Sure, that's a nice story, but with my customers, if I did something like this for them once, they'd expect me to do it every time. If a typo ever got through in the future, it would be my fault. And besides, who has the time to read over everything you get from all of your customers?"

I realize that nobody has that much time, and I also know that it isn't written anywhere that finding all of the typos is the printer's responsibility. The point I'm trying to make is that this is a printer's opportunity. This is a way to make yourself more valuable to your customers than any other supplier might be willing to be. This is a way to gain their loyalty and retain their business, no matter what prices some competitor is willing to offer.

My suggestion is to make it a policy that when there is time, you look for typos or other mistakes. And if you're concerned with the possibility of setting a precedent, when you find mistakes and call them to the customer's attention, you could also say something to the effect that "We were both lucky this time. We try hard to backstop you, but you should never ignore the possibility that a typo or mistake will get by us too."

By the way, typos in the text are not the only mistakes that provide hero opportunities. I once saw the "camera-ready" artwork for a brochure which incorporated two photos. One was a picture of a cow, with a caption that identified a former astronaut as being a member of the board of directors of the company. The other one was a picture of a guy in a spacesuit with a caption about tender meat from healthy cows. I'm not going to name the printer, because this mistake didn't get caught. In fact, the only reason I saw the artwork was because the printer wanted my advice on how to deal with the customer's complaint that someone in the production process should have caught the mistake.

Is it the printer's responsibility to find those mistakes? No. Was it this printer's hero opportunity? I sure think so, and I hope you'll agree that you have similar opportunities too

Just Fix It?

I was telling a friend the Laura Nelson story a few weeks after it happened, and he said something worth thinking about. "As far as I'm concerned," he said. "I would have been happy if she'd just fixed the problem, without even calling me. I don't need to know about problems that never surface as real problems."

Should a printer just fix an obvious typo or mistake? I don't think so, and I have two reasons for that opinion. First, you can be fooled by the "obvious." I know a guy named Terry Smeth, and people are always changing the spelling of his name to "Smith." The way he spells his name looks wrong, but it isn't.

Second—and most important from the sales and marketing perspective—you don't gain anything from a hero opportunity unless people know that you're a hero. Yes, people like my friend might not "need to know" that a potential problem was averted, but from your sales and marketing perspective, you want him to know. You want him to know that he gets more from you than he's likely to get from any competitor.

If you've ever taken an introductory psychology course, you've probably encountered this age-old rhetorical question: "When a tree falls down deep in the woods, does it make any noise?" The real-world sales and marketing application of the lesson is that something good that no one hears about might just as well not have happened.

Spreading The Word

Now think about this: The most direct benefit of a hero performance might come from the person or organization you're a hero to, but there is plenty of additional benefit available with other people who hear the story. Quick printers often talk about "word-of-mouth" advertising, and there's definitely the potential for some very powerful "word-of-mouth" when a customer tells others the story about how you really came through for them. But realistically, how many times will that happen? Not every customer you've rescued will "spread the word," and even those who do will probably never tell more than a few other people the story.

So why not tell the story yourself? I think this is the best way to gain all of the value from your willingness to go above and beyond the call of duty for your customers. My suggestion is to think back on what might be the best "above and beyond" story you have to tell from the last three or four months, and put that story in writing. Ideally, you would put the story together in a "newspaper article" format, complete with photographs and quotes from some of the people involved. From that point, your hero story could be the basis of a press release, a handout piece, or even a direct mailer.

Writing Talent

I know that some of you won't be confident that you have the writing talent to put something like this together, but I really view that as a minor problem. There is plenty of writing/reporting talent available for hire on a project basis. You might start with the journalism department at the nearest college or university. If that's not practical, why not try the local high school, most of which have a school paper or teach newspaper-style writing to at least some degree. If you can't find a student with some writing/reporting talent, you might very well find it in one of the English teachers.

If you like the general idea, but you don't want to deal with the process of searching for someone to put your story together for you, get in touch with me, and I'll put you in touch with the woman who does most of the writing and reporting for the NAQP Chapter newsletters I coordinate. She's an experienced journalist/editor who is working as a writing contractor while at home with her pre-school children. (You can reach me by phone at 919-363-4068; by fax at 919-363-4069; or by E-Mail: dmf@fellman-nc.com.)

We all know about Murphy's Law: Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong. There's a lesser-known corollary to Murphy's Law which states that no good deed will go unpunished. I'd like to remind you that Murphy isn't always right, and this it's very possible for some of your good deeds—your hero-level service—to be richly rewarded.

Your choice is to hope it will happen, or to take a pro-active approach to making it happen.