

How To Compete With Office Supply Superstores

I went out and had copies made at an office supply superstore the other day, and I feel like I should apologize for that. But it was 7:30 in the evening, the quick print shop I've done all of my printing any copying with for the last three years was closed, and I had an early morning flight to catch for a seminar trip. I had to get those copies made as part of a project that had to be completed and on it's way to a client before I left.

So I did business with "the enemy" of many of my friends and readers. It was an interesting experience.

Smooth Start

My encounter actually started out well enough. I walked up to the counter and was greeted more than adequately. I told the person working the counter what I wanted, 100 two-sided copies from each of two two-sided originals, copied on grey stock. He showed me grey paper which could have been either 60# offset or 20# bond. Either one of those would meet my needs, so I told him to go ahead with that particular paper. He told me that it would take about fifteen minutes to finish a job they had running and then make my copies, so I went off to wander around the store.

I didn't ask about price, because a price was clearly indicated on an overhead sign: 100 copies from a single original for \$.03. My expectation was that they'd charge me no more than \$.06 for each two-sided copy, and probably a little less.

As it turned out, I was right about that, but wrong overall. When I picked up my copies, the work order indicated a cost of \$.055 for each two-sided copy. But it also listed an upcharge of \$.03 per two-sided copy for the grey paper.

Now on one level, that upcharge didn't really surprise me. I know a lot of quick printers who charge more for colored copy stock because it does represent an added value. But as a consumer who likes to have those variables spelled out up front, I asked the counter person why he didn't mention that grey paper would cost more than white before we started the job. He answered that I didn't seem concerned with the price at that time, and besides, the colored paper upcharge was listed in their printed pricelist, a copy of which was lying on the counter in front of us.

There was something in the way he said the last part that annoyed me. So I made another comment. I said, "You know, you guys advertise that you sell everything in this store at the lowest possible prices. I'm not sure that's consistent with charging people twice as much for copies if they happen to want them on a different color paper."

"Well see," he said, "that's what you don't understand. It's not just a different color, it's totally different paper. The \$.03 copies are only on 20# paper. This here is 60# paper."

I looked at him carefully now. "So," I said, "are you telling me that the grey paper costs twice as much because it's three times as heavy?"

"Yes," he said. "That's exactly right. So you're actually getting a pretty good deal."

Now, if you don't understand *exactly* why I wanted to beat this kid over the head at this point, I'll explain about the basis weight of paper at the end of this article. But the whole point of the article is that I hope you will understand—and that everyone who works at your front counter will understand things that are so basic to your business. The good news for you is that many of the people who work in the printing and copying departments in the office supply superstores simply don't know these things. *And that's a big part of your competitive advantage over them!* So now let's talk about how you put that competitive advantage to work

Two Issues

There are really two issues here: how you press this competitive advantage when you have people in your shop, and how you communicate it to *get* people into your shop. In other words, how to use this competitive advantage in your face-to-face selling, and how to use it in your marketing and advertising. Let's start with the people who are already in your shop with a need to have copies made.

Selling Strategy, Part 1: Make it *very* easy to identify and use your self-service machines. Think about this for just a moment, you know that you have machines that are meant to be self-service, but do *they*? Why not put a sign above or behind each of these machines that says clearly that THIS IS A SELF-SERVICE COPIER. IT'S EASY TO USE AND YOU CAN SAVE MONEY ON SMALL QUANTITIES AND SIMPLE COPY JOBS BY OPERATING THIS MACHINE YOURSELF.

And instead of placing a sign on that copier that says something unfriendly like NOTICE: YOU WILL BE CHARGED FOR EVERY COPY, EVEN YOUR MISTAKES (Don't even think about laughing, I've *seen* that sign), why not invest some time in creating a user-friendly instruction sheet that will minimize mistakes, and minimize the number of times a customer who *should be* self-service has to come to the counter and occupy someone's time.

Selling Strategy, Part 2: When you have a customer at a convenience copier and you have some time to spend with that person—in other words, when you don't have another customer at your counter talking about a project of greater value—come out from behind the counter and add some personal service to the transaction. Make sure that the customer knows how to operate the machine. Make sure that the customer is familiar with all of the features of the machine. You both stand to benefit if you're able to show this person how to gain greater value from your shop...to do things that he or she might not otherwise have known were possible. (I recently watched a customer in the shop I use make twenty or so copies of each of five originals, and then take them over to section of the front counter to hand-collate and staple each set. She made those copies on a machine that would have done all of that automatically.)

And while you're out there, how about asking this customer a few questions that might uncover other printing needs. I've heard many, many stories about customer relationships that started out with occasional convenience copies, and grew to be much more significant and valuable to the printer. I've heard very few stories, though, about printers who do anything to accelerate that process in it's early stages.

Selling Strategy, Part 3: Be prepared for the customer who comes up to the counter for copying services, either because he or she doesn't understand that you have self-service machines, or because the project is better suited to a machine that you want operated by one of your employees—a high-speed machine or a color copier.

Being prepared in this case means being ready to capture all of the specs for the copy job, and also being ready to “up-sell” any paper choices and/or machine capabilities that are appropriate.

I'd like you to pay particular attention to the word “capture.” It refers to the fact that you often have to *draw out* the exact needs of the customer. The woman who made individual copies of each of five pages and then hand-collated and stapled them is a perfect example of what I'm talking about. If she'd gone up to the counter, and the counter person had asked her if she needed the copies collated and stapled, she would have learned something, and the hand work would very likely have been done automatically. But if the counter person didn't ask that question, this woman—who obviously didn't know that the machine could do the work for her—would probably still end up having to collate and staple by hand.

Selling Tool

I think it's a very good idea to have some sort of a checklist/work order form for copy jobs. A simple form listing all of the common variables would serve as a standardized tool to help you capture all of the specs. It would also insure that this happens consistently—no matter who is taking the order—and serve as the foundation of your “up-selling” efforts.

Depending on the capabilities of your equipment, the capture-the-specs/up-selling questions might range from paper choices to bindery or covering options. *Will plain white 20# bond be adequate for these copies or would you like to consider a colored or heavier-weight paper? Do the copies need to be punched for a three ring binder, or a GBC-type binding system? Would it be appropriate to have us duplex these single-sided originals into two-sided copies? Did you know that we can print the first page of these sets on a different stock and tape bind each set for you?*

Here's an expansion of the checklist/work order form idea: Why not print your copy pricelist on the back of the form? Make it your policy that, as soon as the specs are determined, the form is turned over to show the customer exactly what the job will cost. This would certainly be a way to eliminate the possibility of the sort of unpleasant surprise I had at the office supply superstore. And the *process* you've created through all three parts of this selling strategy can be the core of your marketing and advertising efforts.

Effective Theme

If I had to compete against low copy prices from an office supply superstore for a significant part of my business, I think I'd build my marketing/advertising program around this theme: WE DON'T SELL CHEAP COPIES. I'd design a series of three mailers, each carrying that headline, but each with a different sub-head and a different focus. The first mailer in this series would say: WE DON'T SELL CHEAP COPIES...We Sell Cost-Saving Convenience And Full-Service When You Need It. Number Two would say WE DON'T SELL CHEAP COPIES...We Sell Smart Ones. And the third mailer would say WE DON'T SELL CHEAP COPIES...And Sometimes Neither Do They!

The rest of the message I'd try to get across in the first mailer is that my (relatively) small printshop is a lot easier to deal with than a huge “warehouse” superstore. You'll walk in and find our easy-to-use self-service copiers

right in front of you—along with the people who can help you if you need it—not all the way out in some remote corner of a huge store. I might point out that it's possible to spend a dollar's worth of time to save a penny (or so) on each copy at an office supply superstore.

The rest of the message of the second mailer would focus on the value provided by my staff...an experienced and well-trained group of printing *and* copying professionals. I'd point out that we know our business inside and out, we know about paper and we know about color and we know all of the capabilities of our equipment. And we're very, very willing to put our knowledge to work for our customers, often showing them better ways of doing things. I'd invite people to compare that professionalism and expertise to that of the people they'll find in the copying departments of the office supply superstores, which sell thousands of other products in addition to copy services, and whose overall marketing strategy is to sell on price and volume, not on product knowledge and service.

The core of the message I'd present in the third mailer is that the "featured product" price the office supply superstores advertise may seem very attractive, but if you want anything other than plain vanilla copies in specified quantities, the prices get higher pretty quickly. On the many "real-world" copy jobs that involve colored or heavier-weight paper, and other features like collating and binding, you'll find our prices to be very, very competitive.

Execution

These don't have to be complicated mailers. In fact, I'd probably design them as 5½" X 8½" post cards. I'd send them out in series—one each month to each business on my target mailing list—and then probably repeat the series over the next three month period. At that point, as with any marketing program, I'd evaluate the results I was getting and determine what to do next.

I've had quite a few quick printers tell me in recent months that they "just can't compete with these office supply superstores on price." I hope you'll see that it's possible to take the competition into other arenas. As with any competitive situation, the key to success is a three part process. First, give some thought to the "big picture" and determine where you might have—or find—a competitive advantage. Second, teach, train, or otherwise implement any necessary parts of your program to make sure that you're actually providing that competitive advantage. And third, tell the world why you think you're a better choice than your competitor. *Define* your advantage. *Develop* a program to provide it. Then *communicate* that program and that advantage.

Basis Weight

OK, here's a quick lesson about paper for anyone who didn't understand exactly where the superstore counter person was misguided. A weight designation such as 20# bond refers to the basis weight of the paper. Basis weight is nothing more than the actual weight of one ream—500 sheets—of that paper in a specified sheet size. The kicker is that different paper types are weighed in different sheet or *basis sizes*. The basis size of bond paper is 17" X 22" (374 sq. in.). The basis size of offset stock is 25" X 38" (950 sq. in.). So it's not that an 8½" X 11" sheet of offset paper is three times heavier than an 8½" X 11" sheet of bond, it's that the *basis size* of the paper is approximately 3 times larger. (More like 2½ times actually. A sheet of 60# offset is a little bit thicker and therefore heavier in the same sheet size than a sheet of 20# bond.)

Don't you agree that this is the kind of thing that any printing or copying sales or service person should know?