

I Can Take No For An Answer

The starting point for today is that you can't sell to everyone. I wish you could. I wish / could. The truth of the matter, though, is that no printing salesperson will ever succeed at "closing" every sale or turning every prospect into a customer.

That's OK, though, because there's another "ground truth" to the printing sales situation, and that's that no hard-working quick/digital/small commercial printing salesperson is ever likely to run out of people to sell to. As long as both statements are true—you can't sell to everyone, but you won't run out of people to sell to—the only real negative to hearing "no" from a prospect is the time it took to get there. And even then, if a salesperson works hard enough, he/she can afford to make time and effort investments that don't show a profit. The problem, of course, is that the industry has too many salespeople who don't invest frequently or wisely.

A Common Problem

I had my first session with a new sales coaching client yesterday. "How many customers are you working with?" I asked. "Probably about 20," was the answer. "Are those all people who are actually buying from you?" I asked. "No, about half of them are regular customers. The rest of them are new customers I'm working on."

"OK, let's get this straight," I said, "we don't call them customers unless they're actually buying from you. All the others are either suspects or prospects. They're suspects when you *think* they might be prospects, but we don't call them prospects unless we *know for sure* that they're prospects." I continued and explained my definition of a real prospect. First, they must buy exactly the kind of printing you're best equipped to sell. Second, they must buy enough of it to make pursuing them worthwhile. And third, they must show some real interest in buying from you. "If you really want to be successful at this," I said, "you have to know who's worth pursuing, and that's a combination of all three of those things."

Solids, Liquids, Gases, Etc.

I wrote a column on "Targeting The Very Best Prospects" that ran in two parts in the February and March 1998 issues of *QP*. In the second installment, I noted that all printing buyers will fit into one of five categories: Solids, Liquids, Gases, Players and Price Monsters. *Solids* are happy with and loyal to their current printer, and they simply won't change. *Liquids* are generally happy and loyal, but they will look at other options. *Gases* have some reason to be unhappy with the printer they've been using, and they are completely open to change. In fact, some of the buyers in this category are actively looking to change.

Players typically spread their work out among a number of printers. They're price sensitive in that they'll often buy from the printer in their "stable" who offers the lowest price on any given project, but they won't necessarily have the lowest priced printer in town in that stable. *Price Monsters* almost certainly will. These are the people who make every decision based strictly on price.

I hope it's obvious that a printing salesperson should spend his/her time on liquids, gases and players. "When you identify a price monster," I say in seminars, "you should run away. When you identify a solid, you should walk...but still away!"

"But what if the other printer screws up?" I'm often asked. "Shouldn't I try to build a relationship and keep my name in front of that customer just in case?"

First of all, someone else's *solid* is not your customer! By definition, a *solid* is not even a prospect, because there's no real interest in buying from you. The point I'm trying to make here is that chasing a solid is like staying in a poker hand trying to fill an inside straight. (If you're not a poker player, that's a venture with a low probability of success.) Sure, you'll hit that straight sometimes, but in the long run you'll almost certainly lose money. Making real money at the poker table is usually less about the hands you win than it is about the hands you don't chase and lose!

Frequently Or Wisely

As noted earlier, our industry has too many salespeople who don't invest their time frequently or wisely. My new sales coaching client is a perfect example. She has perhaps 10 actual customers, and her "prospect list" contains perhaps 10 more companies—and I'm pretty sure that we'll learn that most of them are not really qualified prospects. I promise you that we'll be working on filling up her pipeline over the next couple of months!

That process will start with an “action standard”—in other words, a requirement to begin the evaluation process with some number of new companies every week. I’ve asked her to put together a list of 100 suspect companies she thinks will qualify as prospects, at least in terms of buying enough of the kind of printing her company is best equipped to produce to make pursuing them worthwhile. (For what it’s worth, we’re defining “enough” as a minimum of \$2500 per year. Your definition may be higher or lower, but remember, a company that buys \$1000 worth of her kind of printing and \$100,000 worth of long-run, complex 4/color printing would not qualify. Qualifying decisions—just like poker decisions!—should be made on the basis of *probability* rather than just *possibility*.)

Ruthless Qualifying

I’m pretty ruthless about qualifying decisions, and I encourage my clients to operate the same way. More than anything else, I think the early stages of prospecting—which should really be called *suspecting!*—are about looking for people with a good attitude. “I’m happy with my current printer” is not a good attitude. “I don’t have time to talk to you” is not a good attitude. “I’m looking for very aggressive pricing” is not a good attitude. “I’m willing to talk to you, answer your questions and listen to your ideas and recommendations” is the sort of attitude I’m looking for.

That’s not to say that you should run at the first hint of trouble, and I’ve written before about “comebacks” to these common objections. The point is this, if your comeback doesn’t overcome the objection, you may be talking to a *solid* or a *price monster*, and if that’s really the case, I think you’re looking at a very low probability of success.

Next Month

I’m going to continue with this topic next month, because there’s quite a bit more to say about taking no for an answer. What I hope you’ll see today is that it’s you as the salesperson who should probably be saying *no* more often in the early qualifying stages!