

If I Could, I Surely Would

I was listening to some old Springsteen this morning, including the Seeger Sessions album from 2006, which featured Bruce's interpretation of an old spiritual titled "Oh, Mary Don't You Weep." The second verse of the song starts with this couplet: *If I could, I surely would, stand on the rock where Moses stood.* That got me thinking about things that printing salespeople would do, if only they could.

Internal vs. External

I often ask salespeople: *What one thing would you change about your job if you could?* The answers tend to fall within two categories, internal changes and external ones. The internal changes tend to focus on one particular area – speed. *I need to get quotes faster. I need to get answers faster. I need to get my jobs through the system faster.*

I'm sympathetic to these complaints – to a point! And that's the point where the customer's expectations are met. I've observed, though, that many salespeople want quotes/answers/orders faster than their customers need them, which only serves to put unnecessary pressure on the entire system. I remember a conversation with a salesperson who put a three-day deadline on a complex project that the customer didn't actually need for five days. "We'll probably be a day late," he told me, "but I'll still be a day early."

As it turned out, they were right on time against the artificial deadline and two days early against the real need. The customer was happy. The salesperson was happy. Everyone else in the company went crazy for three days to get the project completed, and numerous other orders were impacted. Other customers whose deadlines or expectations *weren't* met were unhappy, and other salespeople who had to deal with those customers weren't happy either.

My point here is not just about *could* or *would*. It's actually more about *woulda*, *coulda*, *shoulda*. The salesperson *could* lie about the deadline, and he did. But would you agree that he *should* not have? Sadly, this happens a lot in the printing industry.

External Changes

The external changes tend to focus on two areas. One is for customers to be more reasonable in their expectations. The second is for them to be more responsive in their communications.

I hope you see the connection between these internal and external "I wish/I need" complaints. And I fully agree that many print buyers do have unreasonable expectations. But the solution to that problem is *not* to lie to the system. That just makes meeting the expectations even more unreasonable!

It is much better strategy to *manage* customer expectations. That takes a certain amount of skill, and also a certain amount of courage. The skill involved is a very specific communication skill – the ability to convey bad news. (That, of course, is where *courage* comes in. Nobody wants to be the bearer of bad news!)

The key to survival as a bearer of bad news is to bring a *yes* as well as a *no*. "I can't do *that*, but I can do *this*. Will *this* work for you?" I can't guarantee that every buyer will agree, but it's been my experience that most buyers will at least consider an option. It's also been my experience that buyers aren't always truthful about their expectations in the first place. In other words, *they're* trying to manage *your* expectations!

Responsive

How do you get people to be more *responsive* in their communications? That's really pretty simple, you give them a *good reason* to respond. Want a prospect to call you back? "Please call" is probably not enough. But acknowledging the situation and providing a good reason may well be. "I'm sure you get a lot of phone calls from salespeople. Let me tell you why this one is worth returning."

If I had to complete that message, I'd say "I have 40 years of experience in the printing industry. I'm hoping for the opportunity to put some of that experience to work for you." Obviously, that may not be *your* value proposition, but please give thought to what is! I promise you, you'll at least increase your chances of a response.