

The Essence Of Good Selling

Today's article begins with a pop quiz. One question. Multiple choice. Get out your #2 pencil— or whatever—and you can circle your answer right here on the page of the magazine. Here we go...

Question: Which of these words best describes the real essence of selling?

- A. convincing
- B. controlling
- C. consulting
- D. counseling

What is the correct answer? Well, there's some of each of these things going on in most people's overall sales technique. In fact, I'm sure that some of you would like to have answered the question with "all of the above." But as usual, there's more to the question than a very simple answer. So let's look at these "four C's of selling" and see what we find.

Convincing

At the most basic level, selling printing is probably mostly about convincing people to buy from you. That's not quite as large a challenge, by the way, as some salespeople have in other industries. Many of them also have to deal with convincing a prospect that he or she needs whatever that salesperson is selling. We know that we need water to drink, for example, but do we really need a water filtration system? Or we know that there's a growing market for color copies, but does that mean that we should spend all that money now for a machine that can produce them.

So it's good news, I guess, that a printer's "product" is need-driven. It makes our convincing challenge easier. But I've got bad news for many printers about the way they are trying to convince people to buy from them. Too many printers are not fully addressing the buyer's most important concerns.

One of the most common convincing techniques I see is the one I call The Big Promise— quality and service. It's so common, in fact, that I constantly wonder why so many printers still make bold statements of quality and service the total focus of their efforts to convince people to buy from them.

It's not that quality and service are not important. Of course they are. Quality and service are critical to keeping your customers and remaining in business. But quality and service can't play the same role in the convincing process. What you have to understand is that quality and service are promises that every printer makes in the effort to sell. The promise alone doesn't differentiate you from all of the other printers knocking on that door.

I've said many times before that if you want to sell me on your quality, don't just show me samples of your work. Show me the documentation of the quality control procedures that guarantee that every job you print for me will look as good as the hand-picked samples you bring around.

How about price as a convincing factor? It's another very common technique. For some printers, low or lowered prices are a promotional tool, offered through discounts or coupons. For other printers, low prices are a way of life. I guess the question I'd ask is this: If low prices were really all that effective a convincing technique, wouldn't you get a much greater response to your discount coupons? Or wouldn't the lowest priced printer in town get all the business in town?

I know you know that convincing is what you're trying to accomplish. The point I want to make is that there's more to it than just stating what to you are the obvious benefits of doing business with you. In a market that's as competitive as the one you work in every day—where every printer makes use of the same strategies and techniques—you sometimes have to provide more in the way of benefits to be truly convincing.

Controlling

If you circled this word, I may be worried about you. It depends on whether you meant controlling the selling situation, or controlling the buying decision. Because there's no way that any salesperson that I'd want to buy from would ever think that he or she had any control over my buying decision. Influence, yes. And that has something to do with controlling the selling situation. But control? Forget it!

Still, there are more than a few books on selling where you'll read that maintaining control of the prospect is the key to sales success. One approach that I've read says that you should never ask a prospect a question that could be answered with a *no*. You only ask them *yes* questions, because that gets them in the habit of saying *yes*. You

decide what you're going to sell them, this approach states, and then lead them on a path that goes directly to the close.

I think printers ought to leave the high pressure approach to the computer and car salespeople. It's one thing to lead the discussion, and this can be done with a fairly light touch. It's quite another thing to try to dominate your prospects and customers. My experience has been that the people who try and sell through dominating control do it because they lack confidence, either in themselves or in their products. My experience has also been that most of their success comes from relatively weak-minded customers. And to a printer, a weak-minded customer is quite likely to be a problem customer.

Consulting

For a number of years now, consultive selling has been a popular topic among sales managers and trainers. In theory, the consultive salesperson is much more than just a person with a product. He or she is a resource, a source of answers and solutions to whatever the client or prospect's problems might be.

That word problem is itself a problem for many salespeople in understanding consultive selling. I've had a number of printers tell me that consultive selling doesn't apply to them because they're not dealing with people with problems. Most of the jobs are pretty simple, they say. There may be questions involved sure, but not what you'd call problems.

OK, let's change that word problem to opportunity. Because there's often a way to take something that works pretty well and make it work even better.

As an example, let's consider the high speed copier. Over the years, the speed and capability of these machines has been improved a number of times. The improvements came, not because the machines were "too slow," but because it was possible to make them faster and more capable—and also because each new breakthrough gave a copier manufacturer a competitive advantage for at least a little while.

I would guess that every quick printer in this country has had at least one copier salesperson in the shop or at least on the phone this year trying to sell a higher level of speed, capability and technology. How do they go about trying to convince you? If the salesperson is any good, I'd expect it's a process that involves questions about the number of copies you run, the kind of finishing and bindery time involved, the amount of time you're given to complete the job, and so on. This is a consultive process, designed to see if a new copier would make sense for you.

Do you need a new copier? Is there a problem with the old one? Even if the answer to both of these questions is *no*, you might still be convinced that a new copier is a good decision, because it brings something of value to your operation like lower operating costs, greater efficiency, or increased profitability on the same volume of work you're doing now. There may be no dramatic problem, but the consultive salesperson has still shown you an opportunity worth considering.

That's exactly the situation that the consultive printing salesperson faces when trying to displace another printer who's been doing a good job for a prospect. The prospect has *good*, your challenge is to show him an opportunity, to show him that you represent *better*.

The foundation for doing that is laid in the questioning process—that is the absolute core of consultive selling. Consulting always starts with questions. It has to. You have to learn what the situation is before you can expect to improve it. And beyond that, as a consultive salesperson you want your customer or prospect to be completely involved in this process. Because—and here's a key piece of psychological understanding for you—people love to buy, but they hate to be sold to. The consultive salesperson realizes that the easiest way to convince someone to buy from you is to guide that person towards convincing himself.

Counseling

Guiding isn't quite selling, though, and the truth of the real world is that even the consultive approach is no guarantee of success. There are many talented fact-finders who can analyze a situation and put the right options before the buyer, but still not end up with the business. Why is that? Because a logical, consultive presentation can lack an emotional element that makes the final connection between salesperson and buyer.

In my experience, the truly great salespeople go a step beyond logic to add this element of feeling to the process. The feeling is equal parts caring—for the buyer—and conviction that your solution is the right one. In a way, it's much more risk-taking than the pure consultive approach. Here, you act not just as consultant but as counselor, saying "*This is what I would do if I were you.*"

These can't be the first words you say if you want to be truly convincing. They aren't words that can stand alone. They have to be supported by your demonstrated understanding of both the "problem" and the solution. They have to be supported by the full consultive process, asking all of the questions and listening to all of the answers. They have to be supported by trust and confidence earned from the buyer through that process. But I'll tell you this, when you can say them with confidence—with caring and conviction—you're in the real major leagues of selling.

The Essence

For something on the order of ten years now, I've had a yellow Post-it note stuck to the back inside flap of the leather wallet-type thing that holds my pocket calendar and address book. It has these words written on it...*the essence of good selling lies in helping people to decide wisely.*

I don't really need the note anymore, because I know the words by heart. But at some point during each of my *PRINTSELLING* seminars, I pull the wallet-type thing out of my briefcase or my jacket pocket and hold it open to the crowd while I read the words that are written on that little yellow square. And without fail, every person in the room bends over his or her notebook and writes those words down, hopefully to find their way to some other personal, permanent spot where they'll serve as a constant reminder of what selling is really all about.

I don't think the majority of salespeople in this country right now understand what selling is really all about. In fact, I think you'll agree with me that it's getting rare to speak with a salesperson and feel like he or she has anything like your best interests in mind. I meet nice caring salespeople, but they have no idea what they're selling. And I meet people who seem to know their stuff, but they sure don't seem to know how to sell it to me. It must be awful to be a buyer who has to deal with such salespeople day in and day out.

Now think about this. Printers talk a lot about being unique in their market area, of finding some kind of product or service that no other printer can match. And I'm supposed to be an expert, but I have no idea what that product or service might be. The truth is, I don't see anything in the nature of product or service that can make you completely unique, but I do see something that will make you quite unique...an intelligent, caring, consultive/counseling outside sales technique.

Yep, from where I sit, that would make you highly unique among quick printers, and make you stand out among any of the people selling anything. Oh, we have intelligent, caring people in this business, lots of them. And we have some who have mastered—or are at least working at—consultive/counseling technique, and others who go outside to sell. What we're lacking is quick printers who employ the whole package and profit from the advantage it brings.

You see, that's what I'd do if I were you.