

## The Printer's Product

Last month I wrote about the difference between craftsmanship and salesmanship, and stressed that the printing or copying that comes out of your shop is a *product* that has a purpose to serve for the people who buy it...your customers! I reminded you that the purpose of almost all printing is to communicate, and that very often, the intended communication is part of the overall effort to sell something. Most of the work that flows through your shop falls into the category of *promotional printing*.

I continue to think that it's important for you to understand that the purpose and performance of what you print or copy is the most important part of the equation for your customers. If a piece of promotional printing doesn't work—if it doesn't *communicate and sell* as well as the customer needs it to—it's a bad product no matter how little or how much it cost; no matter how beautiful it looks; no matter how much craftsmanship went into its production.

The quick printing industry is full of people and shops that can produce an attractive product—and deliver it on time, at an attractive price, and with fast, friendly customer service. I'm not sure that the industry is nearly as full of people who can really help their customers to use printing to sell more of what those customers themselves sell. And *that's* where the real opportunity is in an industry where there's so little difference between what most of the competitors provide in terms of service, pricing, and production capabilities.

Of course, you have to know how to provide that help. I promised that I'd write about gaining that kind of *product knowledge* in this month's QP.

### Two Kinds

I should stress right here that there are two kinds of product knowledge that are important to quick printing salespeople. There is *technical* product knowledge, which concerns all of the factors by which the ink—or toner—gets on the paper, and any further way in which the paper is processed—trimmed, folded, stapled, etc.—to create the finished product. Technical product knowledge has a role to play in creating attractive printed products, and it also has a large role to play in effecting the price of the print job.

But the other kind of product knowledge—what I call *applications* product knowledge—is the real key to creating promotional printing that will perform better for your customers. Applications product knowledge takes you and your customers beyond the common promise of “quality printing” and into the realm of *attractive and effective* promotional printing.

### Confidence Level

The owner and every experienced employee of a quick printshop should already have a fairly substantial level of technical product knowledge. I'll be surprised if you don't already possess some level of applications product knowledge too, though you may not be fully aware of it up to this point.

Interestingly, I've found it that very few quick printers and quick printing salespeople consider themselves to be experts in even the technical elements. At least, that's the answer I get when I ask the question in seminars. I ask, “How many of you would consider yourselves printing experts?” And typically, only one or two hands will come up in an entire room full of quick printers...and those tend to come up only about halfway!

I want to build up people's confidence, so I “re-phrase” the question. “By my definition,” I say, “whenever two people have a conversation, the one who knows more than the other one about whatever it is that they're talking about is the expert. Now by that definition, wouldn't you say that you are the experts in your conversations with your customers, at least most of the time?”

That question usually gets a laugh—and gets quite a few more hands in the air—so I continue and ask about some of the specific areas of expertise that make up applications product knowledge. “Now by the same definition,” I ask, “how many of you are marketing experts? Advertising strategy experts? Copywriting experts? Graphics and design experts?”

With each of those questions, I might get one or two hands up, but there's obviously a much lower confidence level in the areas of applications expertise. But that's OK. The good news is that quick printers don't have to look very far to learn most of what they need to know in order to develop a substantial level of applications product knowledge. As the old saying goes, the answer is right in front of your eyes.

### Take A Different Look

The process starts when you look at printing from a different perspective. Most printers pick up a piece of printed material and look at ink coverage, registration, paper stock, etc. They look at the “quality” of the job. You start to

build your applications product knowledge by looking at the purpose behind the printed piece.

Ask yourself questions like these: “What are they trying to communicate here? What product, service, or idea are they trying to sell? Does the headline or do the graphics reach out and grab my attention? Do the words they’ve chosen do a good job of explaining to me why I should buy what they’re selling? Do I know how I’m supposed to respond to this piece of promotional printing? Do I *want* to respond to it? If I do...why? And if I don’t...why not?”

As a quick printer who wants to stand out in the competitive crowd, you can’t let yourself be limited to the “ink-on-paper” issues. But I’ll agree that asking *yourself* these questions can only take you so far. OK, the next stop is the proverbial horse’s mouth. Start asking *the originators* to explain the thinking behind their printing.

### **Your Customers Know Something**

For the moment, let’s set aside the customers who come to you now to ask for help in designing their printed materials. Let’s talk about the ones who come to you already thinking that they know what they want. They come to you with artwork, and they only want you to reproduce it.

My suggestion is to ask some of these people if they could spend a few extra minutes with you. “I’d like to learn more about the thinking behind a successful flyer, or brochure, or mailer,” you might say. “Can you tell me something about why you’ve made some of the choices you’ve already made, in terms of layout and graphics, color use, typestyles? Can you tell me why you’ve designed it as something that goes into an envelope as opposed to a self-mailer (or vice-versa?)”

“Can you tell me about the thinking behind this particular promotion, or in other words, all of the reasons why you expect this piece of printing to work for you as part of the way you market and sell your own products or services?”

Now, there’s another issue here besides the raw thinking behind these people’s printing. And that issue is whether or not the printing works! How do you find that out? Ask them—after the job is printed and has been “put to work” in the customer’s business—if the brochure, flyer, mailer or whatever it was actually did what they hoped it would do, or what they needed it to do.

If the answer is yes, you’ve learned something about what works in a specific printing/marketing situation. If the answer is *no*, you’ve learned something about what doesn’t work, and that’s equally important. Sometimes helping people to get better performance from their printing is as much a matter of protecting them from making mistakes as it is a result of you making more positive suggestions.

### **Extended Research**

I hope you’ll also realize that this sort of discussion doesn’t have to be limited to people who come into your shop. A discussion of the thinking behind the printing can be the focus of an entire conversation with a prospect on an outside sales call. I teach a technique called “turning in your homework” in my *PRINTSELLING* Seminar, that uses an example of the prospect’s own printing to start this conversation.

“Here’s an example of your promotional printing,” you might say. “I picked it up in your lobby (or someplace else, or I received it in my mail). Tell me about this piece of printing? What was its specific purpose? Why did you design it the way you did? Why did you choose this paper? These photos? These colors? Why did you design this *marketing program* the way you did? And did it work the way you wanted it to?”

This kind of extended research has two benefits. First, it will help you to increase your applications product knowledge. Second, it gets you right into the discussion of what’s *really important* about the printing. And you actually get to do all of that with less pressure in outside selling than you do inside the shop. Because you really don’t have to *demonstrate* your expertise early on in the outside selling process, and that’s where this technique of “turning in your homework” is most appropriate. You’ll show that you’re different from other printing salespeople by simply showing that you understand the importance of the purpose and performance of the printing.

And, you get to add to your applications product knowledge at the same time. That’s not a bad deal!

### **Ask Everybody**

Many quick printers belong to networking groups of some sort, ranging from local sales rep “tip groups” to Rotary or Kiwanis to the Chamber of Commerce. There’s likely to be a fair amount of marketing and advertising and promotional expertise in these groups, but I don’t think many quick printers take advantage of it.

Start asking the people you come in contact with in networking situations about what works and what doesn’t work in marketing and promoting their own businesses, not just about whether you can print for them, or if they know someone else you might be able to print for. Not that you should stop asking those questions...not by any means! But use any expertise you can find to build up your own applications product knowledge.

The bottom line is this: The more you learn about marketing in general, and the role of printing in marketing in specific, the more you have to offer any customer. And—under certain circumstances—the more you can charge for the printing you sell.

### **Certain Circumstances**

OK, you're probably asking, now what does that mean? I'm sure you like the idea of charging more—and earning higher profits—but how realistic is that in today's highly competitive marketplace?

The answer is contained in the basic truth that you can't sell to everybody. I wish you could, but the reality is that you can't. Of course, I don't think I've ever met a quick printer who's in any real danger of running out of people to sell to, so the fact that you can't sell to everyone is not a business-life-threatening situation.

Now among the people you *can* sell to, there are some who will pay extra for your expertise and some who won't. The trick is to recognize which are which, *and focus your selling efforts on them!*

In my own career as a printing and business forms salesperson, I always made a distinction between the people who were buying just the ink-on-paper from me, and the people who were buying my expertise. I tried to sell *everyone* my expertise, but I realized that not everyone was buying it.

So, I'd take some of the business from some of the people who wanted the lowest possible prices on ink-on-paper...when their idea of low enough prices was consistent with my idea of high enough prices. But I really focused my efforts on finding people who needed and appreciated my expertise, especially my applications product knowledge.

### **Down To This**

I guess it all comes down to this: I think one of the things that differentiates the most successful quick printers from the crowd is that they have always been the ones who captured the best customers. Those are the customers who don't quibble about price, who pay their bills on time, and who stay with a printer loyally.

Quality and service have always been part of capturing and keeping those customers, but quality and service are being redefined in a market where nearly every printer is capable of traditional levels of quality and service, *and nearly all of a printer's customers are finding the same kind of competitive situation in their own markets!* It's getting harder and harder for any company to stand out in its market, and more and more companies—more and more of the people who make up “the best customers” for quick printers—are looking to outside sources for help in marketing and selling their own products more effectively.

A lot of progressive quick printers are talking about the future of the industry, and asking themselves questions like: “What will this business be like five years from now? What products and services will I be selling? What will I have to do then to stand out in the crowd?”

I think the successful quick printer of the future might be as much a marketing and advertising *consultant* as he or she is a supplier of ink or toner on paper. So I advise you to start paying attention to the purpose and performance of what you're printing. You have to build up your applications product knowledge to be ready for the future, the way I see it. And if I'm right, you can start using that knowledge and expertise to jump ahead of the pack right now!