

Buying Signals

A lot has been written about selling strategy and technique over the years, much of it contradictory and some of it downright confusing. One of the things that has always confused me is an emphasis on the body language of the prospect. I remember a sales training program back in my Moore Business Forms days in which the trainer demonstrated several examples of body language that he said indicated “I’m ready to buy!” To me, it just looked like he’d had too much caffeine that particular morning.

I don’t reject the idea that there are buying signals, it’s just that I’ve found them to be more audible and behavioral than visual in the printing sales arena. In my experience, the importance of body language is more related to “not-buying” signals. For example, when the person you’re trying to sell to starts looking at his/her watch or playing with papers or other items on his/her desk, that’s probably a pretty good sign that you’ve lost the initiative.

Early Signals

Accomplished salespeople start looking for buying signals very early in the selling process. “The first thing I hope to see is the willingness just to talk with me,” one such salesperson said. “The ‘hard sells’ hide behind their secretaries and their voice mail systems, and while that’s not to say you don’t pursue them—especially if you know that they buy a lot of printing—you still have to recognize that they’re not showing you any sort of buying signal and plan your strategy accordingly. It can be a long haul, just to develop enough of a relationship to get them to talk seriously with you.”

The other side of the coin is the prospect who’s eager to talk with a printing salesperson. “That’s a great early signal, and it usually reflects some combination of three things, two of which are pretty positive. Number 1 is an immediate need, which gets you right into the thick of competition. Number 2 is some level of dissatisfaction with the printer they’ve been using, which gives you a competitive edge. Number 3 is the guy who just wants to check your prices, and while that isn’t always positive, it at least gets you to the next step in terms of talking to the guy.”

It’s important to understand that an invitation to quote is not really a buying signal. At best, it’s a step toward real interest in buying from you, but often it’s not even that. “I’ll take a quote from just about anybody,” a purchasing agent told me, “and that’s all most of the printing salespeople who call on me seem to want, an opportunity to quote on my work. I have to admit, though, that I very seldom buy anything from the ‘new guys’ who give me a few quotes, even if their prices are competitive.”

I think it’s fair to say that most printing salespeople feel overly positive about an opportunity to quote. Hopefully this will open some eyes!

A Good Attitude

My own approach to prospecting has always been to look for people with a good attitude. That includes things like taking (or returning!) my phone calls, giving me cooperative and honest answers to my questions, and giving me the opportunity to build the sort of relationship I’m looking for—one that’s based on value rather than price. Those attitude and behavioral characteristics are the early buying signals that I’m looking for. When I run into someone who shows me a bad attitude, I make myself sell myself on the idea that this person is worth continued pursuit.

This is important! Most of the salespeople I work with—especially the “selling owners”—have significant time constraints. There’s a lot more work in their typical day than there is time to do it, and that’s usually coupled with a personal preference to do anything rather than selling. The less time you have—or the easier you are to distract from selling activity!—the more important it is that you use your selling time wisely. That means spending it on people who are likely to provide a solid return on investment.

I’ve written before that my definition of a real prospect includes three criteria. The first is that the person buys exactly the kind of printing you’re best equipped to sell. Second is that it looks like he/she buys enough of that kind of printing to make your pursuit worthwhile. Third is that this person shows some interest in buying from you. What would make a “suspect” who fails the third test worth pursuing? Only the knowledge that he/she passes the first two tests with flying colors. In other words, someone who buys *a lot* of the kind of printing you’re best equipped to sell.

Think of it this way, people who buy just a little bit of printing are a dime a dozen. That means it’s only worth a little bit of effort to convince them to buy it from you. If a person with low volume potential shows me a bad attitude,

my first impulse is to move on to the next suspect. Once I determine that someone's a marginal prospect in terms of their volume potential, it's a very tough sell to get me to continue the pursuit.

On the other side of that coin, when I determine that someone has large volume potential—and remember, that's a large volume of *the kind of printing I'm best equipped to sell!*—I'll hang in for a long time in an effort to develop some interest in buying from me. That can take time, of course, and there's no guarantee of success. Maybe the best way to look at this is to understand that in the "prospecting" stages, you're looking for small customers and large prospects. If they're small, they need to become customers fast, with a minimum of effort on your part. If they're large, they're worth some time and effort to try to develop real interest in buying from you!

Problems and Opportunities

As noted earlier, any level of dissatisfaction with the current printer can give you a competitive edge. At the very least, someone who's unhappy with his/her current supplier should be willing to talk to you. Just remember that you still bear the burden of providing a solution to the problem and relief for the pain! Most salespeople seem to address this opportunity by "presenting" and then hoping for the best. I can't tell you how many times I've heard some variation of "We had a great conversation" or "He seemed really interested."

These are viewed as buying signals, perhaps, but they're not tangible enough for me. I'd rather see you flat-out ask your prospect how you did. "Does my proposal make sense to you?" you might say. "Does it seem like a good solution to your problem? Do you think it will provide relief for your pain? Are you sold on the idea of buying from me?"

I think that takes us to the bottom line for today. The whole idea of "buying signals" is pretty interesting, but great printing salespeople don't put much stock in a strategy that might fail because a signal was misinterpreted. Great printing salespeople have the *Courage to Question* that I wrote about a few months ago (*Have Courage*, QP, November 2004). They ask provocative questions and they usually profit from the answers—even when the answer is "No, I'm not convinced yet."

So, let's be concerned less with *interpreting* buying signals and more with *making* the sale!