

Close Enough For Government Work

I worked on a construction crew during the summer while I was in college. One of my colleagues had a favorite phrase. Any time we'd find ourselves struggling to get something exactly right, he'd sit down and announce that it was "close enough for government work." Fortunately for our customers, the rest of us had a better attitude, and even when we were working for the government (one of the projects I worked on was a new DPW garage in Laconia, NH), we always made the effort to get things right.

Government Printing

The idea for the first half of this month's column came from an e-mail I received last week. A printer in a state capitol wanted to know what I thought about "specializing" in government work. I wrote back to ask what he meant by "specializing," and he responded that he was just talking about "going after" printing opportunities with his state government. To me, there's a significant difference in those two terms, because purchasing decisions at any level of government tend to be bid-driven and therefore price-driven. So if you're thinking about "specializing" in government work—in other words, hoping to make it a significant percentage of your overall revenue—you absolutely positively need to be a low-cost supplier. The arithmetic is pretty straightforward. If low price wins most bids, you have to have low cost in order to win the bids and make a profit.

The arithmetic for low cost is a little more complicated, but still pretty straightforward. You have to have the right tool(s) for the job, in other words, the most productive equipment for the particular orders you're competing for. You also have to have efficient workflow and highly productive people. With low costs, you can make money at low prices, whether it's government work or anything else. With not-so-low costs, you cannot.

Profitable Pockets

Having said all of that, there are pockets of work within most governmental agencies that are value-driven rather than price-driven. Sometimes the size of the order exempts it from a bid process. And sometimes, a service requirement gives the buyer more leeway. In either of those situations, government work could qualify as good business. I know printers who do very well in these pockets, especially at the state and local level.

Unfortunately, I also know printers who are less disciplined in what they'll compete for. And the classic pattern is to go low on a government bid and still not win it, then go even lower the next time.

Here's a sad truth. We've lost some printers over the years because they couldn't sell enough to survive. But we have also lost some printers because they couldn't survive on what they were selling.

Close Enough

The second half of my message this month is about a "close enough" attitude. Do you have employees who are giving you—and your customers!—anything less than their best? Is your own attitude tolerant of people whose best isn't really good enough? Think back on what I just wrote about efficient workflow and highly productive people. I think it's accurate to say that the quality of your people is the foundation of both the quality of your printing and your business's overall performance.

The people who run the government talk a lot about creating jobs. In the "macro" sense, they're talking about creating new jobs, to bring unemployment down. What I'd like you to think about is a "micro" opportunity—where you create a job by releasing the person who's currently doing it. That won't provide a net gain for the economy, but it could be a significant gain for your company. If there's an upside to high unemployment, it's that talented and productive people are looking for jobs. I guess I'm asking you to at least think about the opportunity to upgrade your team.

And if I've succeeded at that, here's something else I'd like you to think about. Among the unemployed right now are thousands of disciplined and dedicated individuals who have very recently served their country, people who come from a culture of training and professionalism. Doesn't that describe a lot of what you want in a member of your team? I hope you'll consider hiring a vet the next time you have—or create—an open position.