

The 7-Hour Selling Plan

If you believe the TV commercials, you can lose weight and build muscle and look just like those ultra-buff hardbodies on the screen with only two or three 20-minute workouts each week. I'm pretty sure no one actually believes that, but I'm also pretty sure that two or three 20-minute workouts each week will put most people in better shape than they are right now.

The same holds true for selling. You probably won't generate a huge sales increase unless you're able to put forth a full-time sales effort, but you can increase sales volume fairly significantly with even a modest amount of selling time. The key, of course, is a consistent program, and that's what I have for you today. This is a proven program for the owner of a quick printing company—or an employee splitting time between outside sales and other duties—to develop new customers and generate more business from current customers while wearing the “selling hat” for only about seven hours each week.

Basic Strategy and Structure

As I've written before, the first challenge any printing salesperson faces is to identify *suspects*—in other words, companies which look like they have potential to be good customers. The only qualifying requirement for a suspect is that they look like they might buy the kind of printing the individual printing company is best equipped to sell, and they look like they might buy enough of that kind of printing to make the salesperson's pursuit of their business worthwhile. For the sake of discussion, let's set the minimum volume potential requirement for this program at \$5000 per year. You may be comfortable pursuing companies with less potential, but it's important to recognize that the less selling time you have, the more important it is to identify substantial targets.

The second challenge, once a suspect company has been identified, is to identify at least one decision-maker in that company's buying process. The third challenge is to make your first qualifying decision; in other words, after the first closer look at a suspect company, you decide whether they do, in fact, look like they're worth pursuing.

The second stage of the 7-Hour Selling Plan will be to mail six introductory letters every week. The first stage, then, is to identify six people who look to be worth writing to. That might require “looking at” 10-12 companies each week, but that can easily be done within a 2-hour block of time. Since Monday tends to be a difficult day for many quick printers, let's start the 7-Hour Selling Plan on Tuesday, and let's plan to put the “selling hat” on from 9:00 AM until 11:00 AM, giving you time to get the shop organized in the morning, and bringing you back into other management/operational activities well before the middle of the day.

What does “looking at” mean? I recommend a conversation with the “gatekeeper”—either the person who answers the phone, or the first person you meet when you visit a suspect company. With just a few questions, you can learn most of what you need to know in order to make your first qualifying decision. What is the name of the person who buys the printing for this company? What is that person's title? What can you tell me about how much and what kind of printing is used by this company? Can you tell me who (the printing buyer) buys from right now?

Remember, you're looking for companies that buy the kind of printing you're best equipped to sell, and that buy enough of it to make your pursuit worthwhile. Anyone who doesn't—“we don't buy very much printing; we get it all from our home office”—should be immediately disqualified. Your job on Tuesday morning is to find six people who really seem to be worth writing to, and if you can do that in less than two hours, you can take your “selling hat” off early and move on to other things.

Correspondence Day

Wednesday is Correspondence Day in the 7-Hour Selling Plan. Your first task on Wednesday is to generate the letters to the six “suspects” you identified the previous day. Your second task is to make your first follow-up phone calls to the people you wrote to the previous week. Your third task is the ongoing follow-up with your entire suspect/prospect list, and as you expand this list, this part of the program usually becomes the most time-consuming. For that reason, let's allocate three hours to this part of the program, and let's make it Wednesday from 9:00 AM until 12:00 Noon. Again, if you finish earlier, you can take off your “selling hat” early and move on to other things.

What should your introductory letter say? I recommend a brief description of your capabilities, followed by: “I'll be calling you in the middle of next week to see if we can set up an appointment to discuss your printing needs.” The short-term objective of the 7-Hour Selling Plan is to set up a couple of appointments each week, and that takes us to the final two hours allocated to the plan.

Appointment Day

Friday is generally another difficult day for quick printers, so let's make Thursday Appointment Day. Your goal will be to set up two (or more) appointments within a two hour block of time. Initially, I recommend that you try to set up one appointment within the 9:00 AM – 10:00 AM block, and another within the 10:00 AM – 11:00 AM block. Both of those blocks include travel time, so the idea is that you'll be able to get to and from two appointments within those two hours.

In the early stages of the 7-Hour Selling Plan, it will probably be difficult to schedule two "suspect" appointments each week, but you can also use these two hours to meet with current customers. As your prospect list grows, you'll have weeks when it's possible to schedule three or more appointments, and one of your options at that point is to compress the scheduling blocks, perhaps from an hour to 45 minutes. Another option is to expand on the seven hours allocated to sales activity. It's been my experience that most quick printers can make the time to go out on the appointments. It's the time—and discipline—required to identify suspects and set up those appointments that seems so hard to find.

Discipline

That takes us to the core success factor... a consistent effort! I've heard all the excuses, but I remain convinced that seven hours of selling time each week is both reasonable and do-able—and that it's enough to generate a pretty significant sales increase. I hope you've noted that I recommend putting on your "selling hat" in the morning. That's not because morning is better in terms of reaching your suspects, it's simply because you'll still have the afternoon to catch up if something else truly requires your attention in the morning.

Don't be quick to change your schedule, though. Ask yourself if you truly need to deal with "it" right now, or if the world won't end if you wait 2-3 hours to get to it. One of the principles of the 7-Hour Selling Plan is that you never wear the "selling hat" for longer than three hours at a stretch, and I think it's fair to say that most situations that arise in a printshop can wait three hours or less for resolution. They'd certainly wait that long if you took a morning off to go to a doctor's appointment, or an afternoon off to play a round of golf!

Bottom Line

The 7-Hour Selling Plan—or any other likely-to-be-effective selling plan—requires you to put your "selling hat" on at certain times during the week, for specific amounts of time. The bottom line is that you put your "selling hat" on when you're supposed to, and do selling work until it's time to take the "selling hat" off. At that point, you move on to any issues that developed while you were wearing your "selling hat," or whatever else comes next in running your business. This discipline, coupled with a solid selling strategy, can provide you with a pretty significant sales increase in a minimum amount of selling time. That sounds like a pretty good plan to me!