Do Customers Care About Printing Technology?

Do you care whether the man who works on your car uses a hand wrench or an electric wrench to tighten up the nuts and bolts?

Do you care at all whether the chef in your favorite restaurant works at a gas range or an electric range?

Does it matter to you whether the pizza delivery man brings your pizza in an old Chevy or a new Chrysler minivan?

Do you think the vast majority of your customers really care what technology is used to get the ink or the toner on the paper?

I don't.

What Do They Care About?

OK, I'll grant you that there are probably individuals among your customers who are highly computer literate and up on all of the latest imaging technology. They know what a Docutech or an Indigo or a CLC-800 with a Fiery interface can do, because they read about such things in their own industry trade magazines. They understand their own specific applications, and can make the connection that some high-tech, whiz-bang graphic arts machine is the right tool for their job. My feeling, though, is that those people represent a very small percentage of the marketplace right now.

So what do the rest of them care about? I can express that in just a dozen words: Done right. On time. No unpleasant surprises. Works like it's supposed to.

Done Right. On Time.

What is the definition of a print job done right in 1996? Has it changed substantially from the early years of the quick printing industry? There's no question that quick printers of today are capable of a higher level of printing and copying quality, but the ultimate definition of quality is still as elusive as it was thirty years ago.

Quality is extremely relative. What's good enough for one customer will not be good enough for another. One printer will automatically run a particular job with metal plates, while another will show the customer examples of what he or she could expect from both paper and metal, and ask which level of quality vs. cost is most appropriate to the customer's needs. A third printer would simply run the job on paper plates without another thought. The second printer is probably employing the best strategy, but there are customers who will be perfectly satisfied by all three approaches.

Quality may be relative, but special instructions are not. If the job is ordered on green paper with blue ink, and is delivered on blue paper with green ink, it's simply not done right. The same holds true for binding or packaging instructions, or even shipping instructions. There's a tendency among quick printers to think that as long as the job is printed right, the rest can be handled in a more relaxed manner. The fault in this thinking is that the "little things" often put more stress on a customer relationship than a major printing quality problem.

As for "on time," the definition here is pretty simple. If the customer says, "I need it on Tuesday," and you deliver it on Wednesday, it's not on time. The attitude that, "I don't know what the customer got all bent out of shape for...we were only one day late!" has no place in the quick printing industry today.

How about the customer who doesn't "need" the job at a certain time, but you tell the customer that it will be ready on Friday, and by mid-week, you know that's not going to happen? "Need" or not, a delivery expectation has been set, and missing that delivery commitment may very well undermine the trust and confidence that's at the heart of every customer relationship. I think a much better idea would be a mid-week phone call to say, "We're a little backed up, and as it stands right now, we're not going to have your job ready for you on Friday. I want to check in with you to see if that will cause any problems for you, because if it will, we can explore some other options for getting it out on Friday."

No Unpleasant Surprises

A quality problem or a missed delivery would certainly be an unpleasant surprise, but there is another major category of stress that customers have identified...invoice shock! "I want my printing done right, on time, and invoiced at the price I expected to pay," is a very common customer attitude.

I listened in on parts of two telephone conversations at a quick printshop not too long ago. The first was from a customer who had placed a re-order, and was shocked because the invoiced price was considerably higher than the price of the original order. She hadn't asked for—or been given—a current price when she placed the order, and now the printer was forced to explain about the increases in paper prices to an already unhappy customer. A better

strategy: Always provide an up-front quotation! If price is going to be a problem, it's better to deal with it on the front end—where there is still time for a discussion of alternatives—than on the back end after the ink is already on the paper.

(By the way, this is an area where computerized estimating can really help you. I continue to be amazed at how many quick printers have not yet taken this step into modern management. Not only do the best printshop estimating programs give you lightning-fast pricing, they also create the job order, the tracking system, and the invoice. If you're not taking advantage of these benefits yet, getting your estimating and shop management computerized should be a top priority for 1996!)

The second call I listened in on was from a customer was complaining that the invoice was quite a bit higher than the telephone quote she'd received. "Well," the printer said, "when you called in to ask for a quote, you didn't tell us about the photographs. When we actually saw the job, we decided that we had to run it on metal plates to get the quality we knew you'd want."

The customer said—and I heard her distinctly even though I was across the counter from the printer and the telephone—"Metal plates, schmetal plates. I don't even know what that means! But if you tell me it's going to be one thing and it has to be another thing, you'd better call me and tell me about it before you start spending more of my money!"

Works Like It's Supposed To

For as long as I've been writing for this magazine and working with quick printers, I've been preaching that the most important thing about the jobs you print is not how they look, when they're delivered, or even how much or how little they cost...it's how well they work! Every printed piece has a purpose for the customer. It was born out of some need to communicate. And if you can add something to a customer's ability to communicate effectively—or even suggest taking out or changing something that hinders the ability to communicate—you have a lot more to sell than the people who can only provide "done right, on time, and no unpleasant surprises."

You may think "only" is a poor choice of words, but I think you'd better consider this: In today's market, those three capabilities are only enough to make you a good quick printer...OK, I'll accept very good. But they aren't enough to make you a great quick printer. That status is reserved for the quick printers who can go beyond ink or toner on paper, who can impact the performance of the printed piece and help the customer to get better results. In my opinion, the most successful quick printers in the next ten years will those who bring just as much marketing and communications expertise to the table as printing and copying expertise.

Where does technology fit in? From the marketing and communications standpoint, technology "only" provides faster and more cost-effective ways to do things that have been possible for a long time, but not easy to do. I can't see anything that a Docutech does that can't be duplicated by older, more traditional technology. But I also can't see a customer being very excited about the cost and the production time required to offset print and hand collate and bind thirty copies of a manual that involves high-quality graphics and constantly changing information.

If I were a quick printer, the future of the production side of the business would scare me severely. As you know all to well, going digital now involves expensive equipment and corresponding risks. Going digital later should cost less, but there has to be some risk in waiting. How do you manage that risk? How do you insure that you're still in business when all of this high-tech digital production technology comes within a "normal" quick printer's reach.

To me, the bridge is the ability to provide printing that works better, to provide marketing and communications expertise in addition to printing and copying services. Because there are still plenty of customers who need that more than they need to have it come off the highest-tech gadgetry. And I think there always will be.

Am I alone in this opinion? Here's an excerpt from a letter to the editor that was published in the January 1996 issue of Windows magazine. The writer was commenting on the long-time preference for Mac systems in the graphics arena, but he said: "When you cut right to it, clients don't care how their collateral is created, only that it sells product!" If you agree with that statement, you're being pointed toward what to be working on in preparing your business for the future.