

Professionals, Amateurs and Civilians

I got an e-mail from a printing salesperson the other day, and it included a very complete signature block — his signed signature over his name, title, company name, e-mail address, website address and phone numbers, all set to the right of the company logo. What I found most interesting in all of that was that he listed his title as Print Professional. That set off two thoughts. First, is Print Professional a better title than, for example, Sales Representative? And second, what are some of the factors that differentiate the true professionals from the opposite in our industry at this point in time?

Better Title?

I get a lot of questions about titles. It seems like no one is happy or satisfied to be a Sales Representative any more. At one end of the spectrum, there are people who seem to want a more exalted title, like Business Development Manager or Account Executive. At the other end are the people who seem to want to “hide” their involvement in sales. I actually called the salesperson who e-mailed me to ask him why he used the term Print Professional, and he answered that he doesn’t want anyone to think of him as a salesman. “I’m a solutions provider,” he told me. “I’m all about value. Most salespeople are pushy, obnoxious jerks. Print Professional, to me, says I’m not one of those jerks.”

To me is the key issue here. During the course of the rest of the day, I asked seven non-printing-industry people what the term would mean to them. *If you asked a person what he or she did for a living, and the answer was Print Professional, what would you take that to mean?* Five of the seven answered with some variation of *someone who runs a printing machine*.

I hope you’ll agree that this salesperson’s strategy is flawed. It could be fixed, I think, by adding one word to his title — Print *Sales* Professional. At the very least, that wouldn’t confuse people about his role in the printing process. But there’s something else we have to consider here. No matter what you *call* yourself, your actions will still speak louder than your words. In other words, you must *demonstrate* your professionalism in order to convince people that you are a true Professional.

Differentiation Factors

How do you do that? Let’s start with the understanding that this is an *additive* process. There’s no one great big magic thing that communicates professionalism. Instead, it’s an accumulation of smaller things, some of which are probably pretty obvious.

Professionals know their products inside and out. In the printing industry, that’s a combination of two kinds of product knowledge: *technical* product knowledge and *applications* product knowledge. *Technical* knowledge is all about printing processes and capabilities. *Applications* knowledge is all about how the printed product will be used. The top professionals in printing, especially in the specialty graphics segment, are experts in both the manufacture and usage of the products they sell.

Professionals are effective communicators, and that’s also a combination of two elements. One is the ability to communicate clearly. The other is the commitment to timely communication, which connects to what may be the most critical part of the definition of professionalism — professionals always do what they say they’re going to do, when they say they’re going to do it.

And professionals always seem to go the extra step, if not the extra mile. They cross all the “T’s” and dot all the “I’s.” Maybe the bottom line is this, professionals are *trusted!*

If I ask you to trust me, I’m not sure you will. But if I *demonstrate* that you can trust me, that’s a whole different story, right? Or to put that another way, *you* don’t make the decision as to whether you’re a true professional. The people you work with and for do. And that group includes prospects and customers and co-workers and everyone else in the customer satisfaction chain.

Conversation vs. Presentation

Here’s another differentiating factor. In my experience, most printing salespeople are presentation-oriented. In other words, they talk mostly about their companies and capabilities, and not about their counterparts’ wants and needs. *We specialize in vehicle wraps. Let me show you some photos of wraps we’ve recently done. Can we do something like this for you?*

Here's an alternate line of questioning. *Do you feel like you're visible enough in the marketplace? Have you noticed how many highly decorated cars and trucks and vans there are on the roads these days. Do you think that sort of thing could increase your visibility?*

Which of those approaches says *professional* to you? Which one is *consultative*? I read once that people love to buy, but they hate to be sold to. Here's something else I remember reading: *The essence of good selling lies in helping people to decide wisely.*

I think that represents value. Do you agree? And I think that a series of questions is a lot less "pushy" than a couple of statements followed by asking for the order.

Assertiveness

I have definitely met some salesjerks, but I'm not sure I agree that most salespeople are pushy and obnoxious. In fact, I think most salespeople are not assertive enough! Granted, there's a difference between *assertive* and *pushy*, but the willingness to push a little is another differentiating factor that, to me, marks the true professionals.

I recently listened to one of my clients' salespeople on the phone, calling to try to set an appointment with a prospect. "I'm happy with my current printer," she was told. "OK, I understand," she said. "Please don't ever hesitate to call me if that changes."

Here's an alternate strategy. "OK, I understand," she could have said. "but let me clarify my purpose in calling you today. I didn't expect to sell you any printing today, but I'm still hoping to sell you on the idea of investing some of your time in talking to me. I'm sure you're working with a good printer. My position is that we might be even better. Better would be good, right? But we need to talk to find that out! So, will you meet with me for, say 45 minutes, maybe this week or next?"

Creativity

Professionals don't give up easily, but they also don't count on blind persistence to win the day. Another of my clients has a salesperson who had been calling one particular prospect every week for almost a year. He has never received a return phone call, or any acknowledgement whatsoever. At our end-of-the-year review, we decided to assign that prospect to another salesperson, who developed a "5-touch" plan to try to at least get on the prospect's radar.

Over a period of a couple of weeks, he made one phone call, sent out two e-mails, and sent out two packages via Priority Mail. The phone call came first, and he called very early in the morning, when he was pretty sure that he'd be connected to the prospect's voice mail. "My name is XXXX YYYYYYYY," he said. "I'm a printing salesman. I'm putting a package in the mail to you today, and I'd just like to ask you to be looking for it. I hope you'll enjoy what you find in it." The package contained a t-shirt, decorated with the printing company's logo.

One week later, he sent another package, this one containing a variety of printed samples and a very short note. "I hope you're enjoying the t-shirt. This is just to give you an idea of what I'm hoping you'll buy from me someday." That's all. There was no "call to action" or mention of further communication.

A few days after that, he sent an e-mail with an attachment. The attachment was a document which described the company's quality control procedures. In the body of the e-mail, he wrote: "I hope you were impressed with the quality of the samples I sent you. Please take a look at the attached document, which describes our quality control procedures, because this is how we insure that anything you buy from me will look every bit as good as those hand-picked samples." Again, no call to action or mention of further communication.

A few days after that, though, he sent the last element of his plan, an e-mail which said "I hope I've piqued your interest enough to justify taking the next step, which would be sitting down with me for 30-40 minutes to discuss your printing needs. Can I call you tomorrow to set that up?"

Within an hour he had a reply. "I'm in meetings all day tomorrow, so call me on Friday. We have a couple of events coming up and I'm looking forward to meeting with you."

The plan worked perfectly, right? The moral of the story is that one salesperson had a creative, and I think you'll agree, *professional* plan. The other one was just making sales calls.

Amateurs and Civilians

My closing thought for today is about buyers, not salespeople, and it's mostly about buyers who are not very professional in their dealings with printing salespeople and printing companies. I'm talking about buyers who are bad customers, and I'm guessing that you have some of those.

How do you define a bad customer? My definition is pretty simple, *they're more trouble that they're worth!* But the more important question is what do you do with a bad customer, and the answer depends on whether they're bad customers because they're jerks, or because they're *civilians*. That's my term for people who don't have professional knowledge of our industry.

The commonly accepted opposite of *professional* is *amateur*, but I have chosen not to use that term. I think *civilian* shows more respect for the customer. And I think even bad customers are deserving of your respect, especially if there's an opportunity to change their behavior, which is what I think you should try with any current bad customers.

Step 1 is to give some thought to *exactly* what makes them more trouble than they're worth. Step 2 is to go out and talk with them. I've been involved in a lot of conversations like this, which started out with: "Thank you for your business." And then continued with: "We'd like to do even more business with you." And *then* continued with: "But we've noticed that things don't always go smoothly when we do business together, and we think you've probably seen the same thing. So let's talk about the process, and see if we can smooth out the rough edges and work better together."

I think this sort of strategy combines a lot of what we've talked about so far. It's a conversation rather than a presentation, and it's assertive without being pushy. In other words, I think it's the *professional* way to handle a bad customer. And I think you might be surprised at how often it works, maybe not perfectly, turning bad customers into dream customers, but at least enough to change the equation of *more trouble than they're worth*.

What if it doesn't work, though? What if your bad customer is a jerk, not just a civilian? In that case, you should probably fire the customer, but there's a right way and a wrong way (a professional way and an amateur way?) to do that. The wrong way involves angry statements. The right way involves another opportunity to change the equation of *more trouble than they're worth*. I recommend that you simply quote higher prices to any customer that falls into this category, and I predict that one of two things will happen. They'll either get the message, and become a bad customer for one of your competitors, or else they'll continue to buy from you at prices which insure that they're *not* more trouble than they're worth!