

Comedy and Tragedy

As if things weren't tough enough in the printing industry, I heard a story today that takes printing misery to a whole new level. One of my clients went down to the paper store to pick up some stock. While he was standing at the counter waiting for his order, a dog came racing down the main aisle, barking loudly, and the next thing my client knew, the dog had attached itself to itself to his lower leg. Thankfully, this was not a very big dog, but the dog's teeth broke the printer's skin and he ended up getting both tetanus and rabies shots. The dog belonged to another printer, who had brought it along on his own paper run.

My client has decided to see the whole episode in a positive light. "Sales are way down," he said, "but between the other printer and the paper store, I'll probably make enough money from the lawsuit to make it a pretty good year." He's only kidding. I think.

Gallows Humor

I'm hearing a fair amount of gallows humor from all across the industry. Another printer recently called me with a good news/bad news situation. "The good news," he said, "is that they only owed me \$200 when they closed their doors." When I asked about the bad news, he said: "Oh yeah, they were my #2 customer."

There's no question that things are tough out there. There's also no question that a sense of humor helps in times like these. But I think the real question is whether to allow the economy to dictate whether you experience comedy or tragedy. As I've written in recent months, there's real opportunity in today's marketplace. You have to go out, though, and grab it in your teeth.

Here's something else I've written about in the past. You only have two ways to grow your business. One is to gain new customers, and the other is to sell more to your current customers. Most printers seem to agree that the latter is easier than the former, but how are you going to sell them more when they're buying less in general? The answer is to sell them new and different products and services, not just to hope that they'll all of a sudden need more of whatever they're buying from you now.

If I were you, I'd be looking at three product/service categories right now: large format, database development and promotional products.

Large Format

By large format, I mean anything up to 48 inches. You can certainly sell larger formats than that, but I'm told that above 48 inches, physical space requirements start becoming a consideration for most quick/small commercial printers. The poster and banner market right now seems to be dominated by the sign shops, and by a sub-segment of the printing industry that specializes in large format graphics. Their business is down too, but their customers continue to buy, albeit at lower levels, and I think it's highly likely that you share some of those customers.

I'm also hearing that there are good deals on large format printers these days, and the combination of demand for the product, affordability of the equipment, similarity of the knowledge base and uncertainty in the market (read that: sign shops and specialty graphics printers are going out of business too, putting their customers in play) makes this a good time to enter that market!

Database Development

There are lots of quick/small commercial printers trying to sell Variable Data/Variable Image printing these days. Very few are experiencing any great level of success. Why? As I've written before, it's a combination of poor selling strategy and limited market acceptance. The fact is that most businesses in the quick/small commercial printer's target customer range don't know enough about their own customers and prospects to gain full value from the printing industry's *Extreme Personalization* capabilities. And if they do know enough, it's usually not in a usable database format.

They need help to develop those databases, and this seems to me to be a very good time for printers to develop the knowledge to help them do that. I think the market is at least a year away from general acceptance of the whole VDP/VIP concept, which means that you have time to develop the expertise to capture it...if you start now!

You may remember that, back in the old days, we used to say "the printer who owns the artwork owns the customer." In the future, we're going to say "the printer who owns the *database* owns the customer."

Promotional Products

I've had mixed feelings about promotional products for a long time. On one hand, this is a huge industry all by itself, with at least as many salespeople in the field as the printing industry. On the other hand, those salespeople

sell to exactly the same people you do. On the plus side, this is the perfect product category for selling more (defined as new and different products) to your current customers. On the minus side, there are a lot of “trinket” orders which can take up a lot of time without adding much to your top or bottom line.

The secret to making money with promotional products is to minimize the time you spend on “trinkets” and maximize the time you spend on much more significant orders; for example, the \$9000 order one of my clients landed recently for 12 separate items for her customer’s National Sales Meeting. The customer mentioned, by the way, that he spent nearly twice as much on last year’s sales meeting, but they cut back significantly because of the economy.

Think about that for a moment. If last year’s supplier had won the order, it would have represented a decrease in sales. For my client, it was a significant *increase* in sales. I think that story defines the whole point I’m trying to make here.

Want to learn more about promotional products? Take a look at ASI, the Advertising Specialties Institute. In fact, take a look at a special website they’ve set up for quick/small commercial printers: www.asicentral.com/print-industry. I have done quite a bit of work for ASI over the last few years, and I have been very impressed by the membership benefits they provide, starting with sourcing tools and continuing with education and training.

Practicing What I Preach

I’m going to close this month’s column with a shameless commercial for a new product I’ve developed. I have written—some would say, *finally!*—a book on printing sales. Why did I take so long? Quite frankly, writing a book is a lot of work, and the return on investment is not as great as the speaking and consulting work I do.

But there’s been less of that work recently, especially the speaking part, and I have no less desire to make a good living. So what I did was develop a new product that I could sell to my current customers—and hopefully to some new ones too.

I guess I want you to know that I practice what I preach. I also want you to know that you can order the book at my website, or using the order form that you’ll find here in this magazine.