

Communication Failures

I'm an American. I think you talk funny, and I have no doubt that you feel the same way about me. We both speak English, but it's not quite the same English, is it? Whenever an Australian and an American speak, there is potential for miscommunication.

The same is true whenever a print seller and a print buyer speak, regardless of what language they're speaking. And miscommunication has probably killed more sales—and more buyer/seller relationships!—than any other factor.

In this and future columns, I hope to share with you some *Fundamental Sales Wisdom*. Here's the first installment: *It is never the buyer's responsibility to communicate with the seller. It is always the seller's responsibility to communicate with the buyer.*

Professionals and Civilians

Here's one-third of what that means. Most print buyers are *civilians*. That's my term for people who don't have professional knowledge of our industry. By strict definition in American English, a civilian is a person who isn't serving in the military, but I hope you'll see the correlation. The normal opposite of *professional* would be *amateur*, of course, but I think *civilian* represents a more respectful term for our customers and prospects.

The point is this, because they are civilians, we have to help them to understand—we have to make sure they understand! If there's any ambiguity, it's the seller's responsibility to sort it out. In my experience, most of the problems that occur between printing firms and their customers come from a miscommunication of specifications, instructions or expectations. The question the seller should always be asking is *am I sure we all know exactly what we're doing here?*

Jargon

Another miscommunication issue is salespeople who speak fluent jargon, or who seek to impress buyers with big words—often misused—when smaller words would make for more effective communication. Last month I made four sales calls with a salesperson who used the word “facilitate” so many times during the first call that I consciously counted the number of times he used it on the next three—16 times! At one point, he said: “I want to facilitate a dynamic process of making it productive for you to order all of your image-dependent printing from me.”

Here's what I think he meant: “I think I can make your life a little easier—at least the part where you're involved with printing and printers—and I hope that will earn me a large share of your business, especially the jobs that have to be done right the first time!”

Which one of those statements makes the most sense—or has the most appeal—to you? Do you sometimes wonder what the salespeople who call on you are actually trying to say? How many times in the last 6 months have you heard some variation of: “Our (digital workflow/document handling/paper ordering/production tracking/employee benefits) solution will foster an improved business model and enable greater profitability.” Does that make you want to buy it, or call for help?

Staying In Touch

The final third of today's discussion is simply about staying in touch with your customers. It's not their responsibility to stay in touch with you. It is your responsibility to stay in touch with them! But there's more to this than calling at some regular or irregular interval to see if they need anything.

Think of it this way, calling to ask if they need anything is mostly about you—because you're hoping to get or at least compete for an order. Sure, there's an element of customer service in such a call, because you're calling them rather than requiring them to call you, but there's also a risk that you'll cross the line from good customer service to being a pest.

A better strategy would be to make your calls mostly about *them*, and that could range from a simple thank you call to an opportunity to educate. Consider these two possibilities:

“Hi, this is Dave from Dave's Printing. Do you have anything for me to quote on today?”

“Hi, this is Dave from Dave's Printing. I was thinking about you yesterday. I heard/read/learned something that I thought might apply to your business. Have you ever heard of...?”

Yes, it takes some creativity to come up with a series of good reasons to call, but in my experience, that creativity will be rewarded. The key element is to communicate that you value the customer's business. If you accomplish that, on a regular enough basis, I'm pretty sure they'll always call you when they have something for you to quote on.

Interval Strategy

Here's a final thought for today. For every customer and/or prospect, there's a correct interval—some number of weeks that you should never let go by without either you hearing from them, or them hearing from you. Sticking to that interval is a very good way to eliminate this particular type of communication failure. And by eliminating the jargon and sorting out the ambiguities, you'll go a long way toward removing any miscommunication risk.