

It Sells Itself!

I often hear salespeople and marketing people talking about products that *sell themselves*. Whenever I hear those comments, there's no doubt in my mind that what I'm really hearing is the *desire* for products that sell themselves. It's every salesperson's dream, right? To have a product that's so *hot* that all you have to do is go out there and take the orders!

Well, I'm not sure that I believe that printing and copying services really sell themselves in that way, even though there's obviously a huge demand for the products and services a typical quick printer provides. But here's a thought for you: If a product or service is that easy to sell, then anybody can sell it. And if anybody can sell it, why should anybody who wants it or needs it buy it *from you*?

See, I'd rather deal in products that require a little bit of selling, because in that selling process, you have the opportunity to show people *why* they should buy from you and your company...either one individual product, or all of the products and services you sell. I think that's especially important when you sell a broad range of products and services—as a typical quick printer does—and even more so when you're not the only possible source of supply for the products and services you sell.

When you come right down to it, your success hinges on *selling*, and *selling* might be defined at least partially as getting your customers to buy as much of what you sell as you can. A large part of your ultimate challenge is to get each customer to buy all of the products and services *that they use* and *that you sell from you*, and not from any other possible source of supply.

Value-Added

The best strategy to meet this important challenge is *value-added* selling. *Value-added* is a term I know you've heard before. But I want to make sure that you understand what the term really means.

On one level, value-added means simply that you take a raw material and do something to it that makes it more useful and valuable than it was before. For example, a carpenter starts out with a stack of lumber and adds value to that raw material by turning it into a deck attached to your house. Now you have a comfortable place to sit outside and relax or entertain friends...a great place to set up the grill and barbecue steaks or chicken or hamburgers or hot-dogs. You see, don't you, how the wood has more value to you as a deck than it did as a stack of lumber?

Here's another example, maybe a little more direct: a printer buys paper, and applies text or graphic information to that raw material using ink or toner. The result is something that has a specific value to the printer's customer.

That's the most basic definition of value-added. And I think you'll see that it tends to apply mostly to products...to physical things. But for a salesperson, there's an opportunity in value-added selling that goes way beyond the benefits and the specific value attached to a single product. And that's to establish a special added-value in doing business with you.

How do you do that? By establishing three things. One, that you're interested in your customers and their businesses. Two, that you're an expert in your business. And three, that you're willing to share your expertise to help them improve the way they do things in their own operations.

A Good Reason

When you establish those three things, you give the customer a very good reason to buy from you, instead of from the other guy. And I'll tell you something else...when you establish those three things, you also make price a much less important consideration than it is when the product—and the supplier—are treated as commodities with no discernible differences attached.

Now, how do you show people that you're interested in them and in their businesses? By asking questions, and basically by talking more about them and less about you. The typical salesperson is focused on making *presentations*, but I say that's the wrong approach. I think you should focus on learning about your customers and prospects, especially in the early stages, when you're trying to get them to decide to do business with you.

I realized a long time ago that people love to buy, but they hate to be sold to. If all they hear from you are presentations and declarations about all the great things you can do for them, they're likely to think that your biggest interest is in selling to them, not in helping them to buy wisely.

How about committing to this as an important part of your overall selling strategy...on every customer contact, try to learn two things about your customer or your customer's business for every one thing you say about yourself or your company.

Your Expertise

Now, how do you establish yourself as an expert in your own business? The first step is to build and then maintain a very high level of product and market knowledge. The more you know about your products and their applications, the more capable you are of being an asset to your customers.

And that applications knowledge may be the most important part. Product knowledge in the 1990's means a lot more than just knowing that a thing comes in five different sizes four different colors. You have to know how your products work...what opportunities they address or what problems they solve...when to use one particular product to get the best results and when to use another.

And then you look for opportunities to apply your product and market knowledge. Not just to *display* it, but to *apply* it, and there's a subtle but important difference here. Product and market knowledge aren't things that you just spout off as the spirit moves you. I want you to understand that the value of your experience and product and market knowledge in selling is directly related to the needs or the interest of a specific customer at a specific time.

How do you know what a customer needs? What a specific customer is interested in at a specific time? You ask them...it's as simple as that. Ask them what they're working on...ask them if they've got any particular problems or opportunities you can help out with...ask them regularly if they have any questions you might be able to answer. This is all part of talking more about them and less about you, and I hope you see how it all starts to tie together.

When you understand what they need—what they want, and what they're trying to accomplish—you look to your experience and product and market knowledge for the best way to meet that need. And then you might say: "Have you ever thought of trying it this way?"...or, "Here's how I think you could or should do that"....or maybe this variation: "I have a couple of ideas that might get you really good results."

I've been saying for a long time that experience and product and market knowledge represent a very strong positive force for you if you can bring them to bear. I'd like to see you make a commitment to proactively seek opportunities to demonstrate and apply them. Ask questions, make suggestions, suggest options for your customers to consider.

And don't forget to stress to your customers that they can call on you any time they have need of your expertise. That's how you establish your willingness to share what you know. That's how you can make yourself a permanent value-added resource...much more than just a person that gets called just because he or she happens to have the lowest price on a particular product or service.

Coming Through

Now, of course, there's another part to that particular challenge...you have to come through for them when they call. And on that subject, I'll tell you something I've learned in my own selling career. You don't always have to have the perfect answer or suggestion to maintain your status as a *value-added* salesperson, once you've established it. But you do have to return their calls—promptly!—and demonstrate responsiveness to any request for your input. Being there *when* they need you is a big part of being the value-added supplier in your business.

Now, what we've talked about up to this point are really issues of strategy...big-picture considerations of an overall philosophy of selling. I'd like to extend that strategy a little bit, and then spend a few more minutes giving you a tactical suggestion for building sales with individual products...right out at the point of sale, where the salesperson and the ultimate end-user customer are face-to-face. That's where you get the best opportunity to sell.

Here's a starting point for this part of our discussion...you want to make your business grow. I guess that's an assumption on my part, but I think it's a pretty good assumption. I don't know too many people in business who don't stand to gain by ringing more sales—more profitable sales—into the register. That should hold true whether you're an employee or the person who owns the business. Building sales—profitable sales—is good for any business.

So how many ways are there to make your business grow? Two ways, and really only two. One is to gain more customers. The other is simply to sell more to the customers you've already got.

Is one of those easier than the other? Well, most salespeople tell me that getting a new customer can be pretty hard work. Maybe not physically hard, but you put a lot into it and it usually takes time. So it stands to reason that it's going to be easier—and quicker—to build sales by selling more to people who have already decided that they like you and trust you enough to do at least some business with you. So let's just focus on that part of selling. Let's look to build sales the easier and quicker way.

Now, just within that focus, you also have two ways to make your business grow. One is to sell these people—your current customers—more of what you're already selling them. The other is to sell them something new.

Is one of those easier than the other? Maybe easier isn't the right word. Maybe more feasible is what we should be saying. Because if they're already buying all of their letterhead, envelopes, brochures and business cards, or whatever it might be from you, how are you going to make them buy more? If they're already buying all of what they need in these individual printed products from you, is it reasonable to expect that you can cause them to need more?

I don't think so. I think it's much more feasible to expand on the number of things that you sell them than it is to hang your hat on creating more need.

Research And Educate

So let me set a scene for you. A customer comes in to buy something that he or she needs that day. Let's say it's an order for business cards. This order has nothing to do with any other individual product that you sell. But it gives you an opportunity to make this customer aware of other products, or other capabilities you can apply to his or her benefit.

When you complete the process of taking that business card order, don't be satisfied to say "Thank You" and let this person get away. I'd rather see you take a proactive approach to gaining the next order with a process that I call R&E—research and educate.

A few minutes of R&E can do two things for you. It can help you to discover other needs that this customer has right now that you can satisfy, and it can help you to plant seeds for something that might come up in the future. Either way, it allows you to address what I've always said is the worst thing you can ever hear from a customer...the words "I didn't know you could do that."

Well, all right, maybe that's the second worst thing you could ever hear from a customer. It would be much worse to have a customer say "I'm never going to do business with you again!" But I hope you realize the words "I didn't know you could do that" often mean that this particular customer has been buying something elsewhere that he or she didn't know you could provide, and you've been missing out on business that you might otherwise have been getting.

Three Questions

The R&E technique is really very simple. It really only involves asking one of three simple questions: "What else are you working on right now?" to see what other immediate needs or projects this customer has going besides the business card that he or she ordered today; "Do you ever need to..." attached to a product or capability you want to make this customer aware of; or a variation of that question: "Did you know that we can...?"

For example: do you ever need to—or did you know that we can—print custom presentation folders for you, even in very small quantities, at a very reasonable price? (Do you recognize the product that provides the opportunity behind those two questions? It's the Essapac two-part presentation folder, which I still think is the coolest value-added product ever developed for the quick printing industry.)

You can use those last two questions to educate customers on any product or service you might choose, though. Rubber stamps...color copies... business forms...whatever product or service you choose to use as the focus for increasing your business with any particular customer.

I'd like to see you make a commitment this value-added selling strategy. The commitment is never to let a customer leave your shop without either you learning something more about them and about their need for your products and services, or them learning more about you and how you can meet those needs.

Nothing Sells Itself

The R&E technique will work for you by uncovering current customer needs that you can satisfy, but are now being handled by other suppliers. Somebody else is making the money, in other words, and not you. The R&E technique will also work for you by planting seeds in the minds of your customers, and introducing them to capabilities they might not have known that you had.

In fact, you might introduce them to capabilities they didn't know that they had...to things that they might have thought were impossible. The Essapac product is a perfect example of that. Before this product, a means to produce custom printed folders and binders in very small quantities at a reasonable price simply didn't exist. Short-run, full-color printing from a connected copier or a digital press provides a similar new capability.

The R&E technique will also work for you by providing your customer with an *added-value* in doing business with you. And that's how all of what we've talked about today ties together. When you're the one who goes out of his or her way to learn about the customer's business and the customer's needs—and when you're the one who seeks to educate the customer, and expose them to new capabilities and better ways of doing things—you're a much more important and valuable supplier than the one that just takes the orders. That idea won't sell itself, but when you do sell it, it's a sale that will pay off you, over and over again!