

Your Product Line, Your Strike Zone and Your Selling Proposition

I asked a group of printing salespeople at a seminar last weekend to tell me exactly what kind of printing they sell. My specific question was: "How do you define your product line?"

The first answer was "I don't sell printing, I sell business communications solutions." I said: "You're wrong."

The second answer was "I sell mostly digital printing, and some offset." I said: "You're wrong too."

The third answer was "I sell anything in the realm of ink on paper." I said: "You might be wrongest of all!"

"OK," said one of the other attendees, "what kind of printing do *you* think we sell?"

"Brochures," I said. "Letterhead. Envelopes. Business cards. Manuals, newsletters, posters, banners, flyers and forms. Here's the first issue, these are the terms that printing buyers use to describe the printing they buy. If you want to communicate effectively with them, you have to speak their language!"

Product Line

Beyond the issue of clear communication, there's another important issue to a printing company's product line. *Product line* is all about *capability*, and between internal capabilities and outsourcing possibilities, a quick/digital/small commercial printer's product line is pretty much infinite. I heard a story recently about a printing salesperson who sold one of his customers an expensive leather chair.

I have an ironclad rule that I'll talk about sourcing just about anything for a customer, but in reading that statement, you have to remember that I differentiate strongly between suspects, prospects and customers. A suspect is someone you *think* might be a prospect. A prospect is someone you *know* to be a prospect, and to qualify as a prospect they have to meet three criteria. First, they have to buy exactly the kind of printing you're best equipped to sell. Second, they have to be enough of it to make pursuing them worthwhile. Third, they have to show some interest in buying from you.

A customer is someone who's actually buying from you, and in all probability, that means that price is not the most important consideration is his/her buying decision. (That's not to say that your actual customers are not price sensitive, but I'm betting that most of them could find prices lower than yours if they really worked at it.)

What that really means is that your *strike zone* is wider with a customer than with a suspect or prospect.

Remember, the first criteria for a fully qualified prospect is that they buy exactly the kind of printing you're best equipped to sell.

Strike Zone

Hopefully you'll understand the baseball analogy here. If you only swing at pitches that are in your strike zone, you'll almost certainly have a higher batting average. As noted, *product line* is all about *capability*. *Strike zone* is all about *competitive*.

I think it's fair to say that newsletters represent one of the most attractive sales opportunities for a quick/digital/small commercial printing company, and a newsletter certainly fits within the product line of every such printing company I've ever worked with. But how about the strike zone? Let's say that we're talking about an 11" x 17" sheet that folds down to be a 4-page newsletter, printed 2-over-2. At a quantity of 1000, that's right down the middle of the strike zone for a small format, 2-color offset press. But what if the quantity were 10,000? Do you see how a printer with a 25" press would have a pricing advantage on that quantity?

Here's a classic mistake. A salesperson gets all excited about the opportunity to quote on a big job in the early stages of trying to build a relationship with a suspect. Because the printer's equipment is not well suited to the job—or because the combination of an outsourced cost plus a satisfactory profit margin produces a price that goes well beyond the "competitive" level—the suspect decides that the printer's prices are "way too high" and doesn't even talk to the salesperson about future projects that are well within the strike zone.

I think a salesperson would be far better off declining to quote in that situation. "Mr. Suspect," you might say, "I would love to land a project like this one, but the fact of the matter is that it's outside of our strike zone, and I'm never going to ask you to consider me for a project where I don't think I'm your best choice. What will you be working on next?"

I see this as a situation where a salesperson could choose to look good in terms of building trust and confidence, or risk looking bad with a price that's not even competitive. Do you have any question which is the better strategy?

By the way, remember that the strike zone expands as the relationship grows, and declining to quote in the early stages doesn't preclude competing for that sort of project later on. "Mr. Customer," you could say, "do you

remember when I passed on quoting on your newsletter the first time we met? Well, some things have changed, and I'd like to take a shot at that project the next time around. I still may not have the lowest price, but I think I might be close enough to make me your best choice."

Selling Proposition

The last part of that statement might represent a part of your overall selling proposition as well. *Product line* is all about *capability*. *Strike zone* is all about *competitive*. *Selling proposition* is all about *why you think they should buy from you*, or perhaps in the early stages, *why you think they should meet with you and talk with you and take you seriously*.

This is also where something like "I don't (just) sell printing, I sell business communications solutions" would fit in. I want to caution you, though, that a statement like that has to be explained in greater detail. Why? Because I think if you stopped 10 people on the street and introduced yourself as a "business communications solutions" provider, at least 9 of them would think you were selling telephones or internet services. The danger in "catchy slogans" is that they won't catch you any business if your suspects and prospects—and customers!—don't understand what could be/should be buying from you.

Should "anything in the realm of ink on paper" be part of your selling proposition? I don't think you'll find a stronger proponent of outsourcing among any of the consultant-types in the industry, but I still want you to stick to your strike zone with suspects and prospects. Once they become customers, it's a whole different story, and outsourcing can add pretty dramatically to your sales volume potential. Up until that happens, though, the farther you stray from your strike zone, the less likely it is that they'll become customers in the first place!