

## Prospecting Skills and Attitudes

Are you doing enough prospecting?

For 99% of all printing salespeople, I think the answer is *no*. That's my experience anyway. I hear a lot of talk about wanting to make more money, but I don't see as much action toward making it happen. And I think there's a simple equation at work here—more money requires more customers!

Yes, you stand to make more money by increasing your business with your current customers, but there's a risk attached to that strategy. The bigger they get, the more it hurts when you lose them, and I think it's been proven in the marketplace that customers are not forever. So on one hand, if you want to make more money, you should probably be doing more prospecting. The same goes for wanting to minimize the risk of making less money. I've seen far too many incomes suffer when a big customer was lost, and there were no potential replacements in the pipeline

### Skills and Attitudes

Obviously there are skills involved in effective prospecting, but I think it all starts with your attitude. The following five statements represent the attitude that I would like you to have. *I do want to make more money (or minimize the risk of making less.) I will make the time to prospect for new customers. I won't get discouraged if I don't get immediate gratification. I will identify and pursue worthwhile prospects. I won't lose sight of my goals.*

This all begs a question. Is prospecting fun? In my experience, parts of it are, but most of it isn't. That begs another question. What is prospecting anyway? Here's my definition: *Prospecting is an activity chain that begins with the identification of suspect companies, and ends with the first meeting between the buyer and the seller.* The term *suspect* refers to a company that is not yet a qualified prospect, and here's what that means. In order to be considered a fully qualified prospect, you have to know—not just think or hope!—that the company meets three criteria. First, that they buy, want or need exactly the kind of printing you sell. Second, that they buy, want or need enough of it to make pursuing them worthwhile. And third, that they have some real interest in buying from you.

In truth, we should probably call this process *suspecting*, but I'm not hopeful I'll ever succeed in changing the terminology of a whole industry. So let's call it prospecting, and let's also recognize that prospecting is all about getting to that first meeting. Which is fun, right? The meetings anyway. It's the work you have to do to get the meetings that is usually not fun, especially considering that most of your suspects will decline to meet with you, and maybe not even return your phone calls and/or e-mails. That's why it's so important to have a strong prospecting attitude.

### Critical Skills

What skills are required to be effective at prospecting? The first two are analytic skills, the ability to identify good market niches and the ability to calculate a suspect's annual volume potential. The next one is a research skill, the ability to identify the decision-maker and the rest of the players or influencers. The next two are communication and convincing skills, the ability to craft and deliver an introductory message and the ability to deal with a number of predictable early-stages objections; for example, "I'm really busy right now," or "I'm happy with my current supplier." The last one is an organizational skill, which I've written about before, and that leads to another important attitude statement: *I won't let any new business development opportunities fall through the cracks!*

### Beyond Prospecting

Looking beyond prospecting, I like to say that the first meeting is the end of the prospecting stage, the beginning of the convincing stage, and the heart of the opportunity stage. The opportunity part is really important. You must understand that most of your first meetings will be held with suspects; in other words, you won't know when you first sit down with them whether they're fully qualified prospects. So part of the agenda is to determine if they do buy, want or need enough of the kind of printing you sell to make them worth pursuing. The other part of the agenda is to explore their real interest in buying from you. Remember that being willing to meet with you is often a long way from being ready to buy from you, so the first meeting is your opportunity to learn *exactly* how you can differentiate yourself from the printer-in-place.