

Don't Tell Your Whole Story!

"We've had a couple of good meetings," the salesperson told me, "and she says our prices are very competitive, but she's still not ready to change. I've told her about our digital capabilities and our web portals and our mailing services. I don't know what to do next."

It's a classic dilemma. You tell your whole story, and it's still not enough to change the status quo. Maybe the problem is that you shouldn't have told your whole story in the first place!

Rush To Judgment

It's been my experience that most quick/digital/small commercial printing salespeople are very presentation-oriented. In other words, they can't wait to shoot off all of their big sales and marketing guns. The unfortunate result is that the buyer usually doesn't hear most of what the seller is saying. A lot of it simply gets lost in the volume of words. (Another way to say this, of course, is that most salespeople talk way too much!)

We all know that digital capabilities and web portals and mailing services are pretty cool things. We all know that these things could be/should be a benefit to the buyer's business. It's worth asking why all the buyers don't feel the same way. I think part of the answer is that they're hearing about *features* and not connecting them to *benefits*.

Why? As I just said, part of the answer is that they're not hearing everything in the first place. Another part of the answer, though, is that they're not smart enough to make the connections between the features and the benefits. Think I'm kidding? How many times do *you* connect the features to the benefits all by yourself when someone's trying to sell you something. Are your suspects, prospects and customers really any smarter than you are?

Read the next three sentences carefully. *It is the seller's responsibility to communicate with the buyer. It is not the buyer's responsibility to understand the seller. If true communication does not occur, the status quo rarely changes.*

Smaller Slices

I think it makes a lot more sense to try to sell your whole proposition in smaller slices. Think of it this way. It's pretty rare for a person to love or hate *everything* about the situation they're in. Even the person who is "happy with" his or her current printer may have some small area of dissatisfaction with the status quo. That's why I always like to ask: "Is there anything, no matter how small, that you would change if you could?"

I've found a lot of situations over the years where the buyer was 90% satisfied with the status quo. Yes, there were little things that could be improved, but "nobody's perfect" seems to apply to most people's buying expectations. From a seller's perspective, "nobody's perfect" is good when you're on *defense*—in other words, when things go badly with the work you do for your current customers. When you're on *offense*, trying to win the business away from their current supplier, "nobody's perfect" is a killer.

Pain Points, Hot Buttons

I strongly believe that the best strategy for a first appointment with a new prospect is a series of questions that will help the seller to understand the buyer's wants and needs. I recognize, though, that that level of sales sophistication may be beyond the current capabilities of many printing salespeople. OK, there may be a compromise between the sort of fully consultative selling I want and the sort of purely presentational selling I generally see. This compromise involves a "bullet-point" presentation followed by a question.

"We have 6 main capabilities," you might say. "We do a lot of 2 color printing in run lengths from 500 to 5000, and sometimes even longer runs depending on the exactly what we're printing. We do a lot of full-color printing in run lengths from 50 to 500, and most of that is done using digital printing equipment. Our digital printing equipment allows us to turn that sort of project around very quickly, and we have very well-defined quality control procedures to insure that everything we ever print for you will look just the way you want it to. We also have layout and design capabilities—maybe not the level you'd pay thousands of dollars for at an ad agency, but certainly adequate for the kind of basic business printing we specialize in. And finally, we have pretty complete mailing capabilities, so if any of what you print goes right into the mail, we can handle all of that for you under one roof."

"Now,"—and this is where *presenting* turns into *selling!*—"does any of that touch a pain point or hit a hot button?"

Feature To Benefit

If the answer is “yes,” you’ve identified a possible tipping point. Your challenge now is to expand your understanding of the buyer’s interest, and to make sure that you understand the benefit the buyer will gain by taking advantage of the feature he or she has shown interest in.

Two things are important here. First is the translation from *feature* to *benefit*. “We do a lot of full-color printing in run lengths from 50 to 500, and most of that is done using digital printing equipment” is a feature of your business, but by itself, it’s not enough of a reason for most people to buy from you. “That gives us a significant advantage in meeting those quick turnaround requirements you’ve told me about” is a benefit statement, and that’s the point you need to drive home. Second, please note my use of the phrase “make sure *you* understand” in the previous paragraph. In addition to owning the responsibility to communicate, it’s also your responsibility to know exactly how your capabilities can benefit your suspects, prospects and customers. If you don’t know the benefits well enough to sell them with confidence, you may have a perfect solution, but it’ll probably go unsold.

Focus!

The bottom-line lesson for today is that most people will need help with the decision to buy from you. First, they’ll need to know that they’re interested in some part of your overall proposition. You determine that with questions, not with statements—or at the very least, with one critical question after a “bullet point” presentation. Next, they need to clearly understand the benefit your solution provides. Finally, they will probably need time to make their decision.

The top performers in our industry find a way to have multiple, ongoing conversations about a pain point or hot button rather than a one-shot presentation about the whole gamut of products and/or services. That’s how they deal with the time involved in making the decision that they’re hoping for. They recognize that selling is an additive, cumulative process.

And by the way, if they don’t find any pain points or hot buttons, they go looking for someone else to talk to!