

## Honesty Is The Best Policy

Which is more important in printing sales, to be honest with customers, with the production side of your business, or with yourself? I think too many salespeople are dishonest with at least one of those parties. You might be surprised at which one I think causes the most damage.

### Honest With Customers

Salespeople make promises. If you think about it, that's really the essence of selling. *I promise that you'll be happy with the quality. I promise that we'll deliver on time. I promise that you'll be happy with the entire outcome of doing business with me and my company.* I don't think most salespeople are consciously lying when they make those promises, but the reality of the business is that promises aren't always kept.

There are two lessons here. The first is that salespeople have to be careful about the promises they make. *Overpromise and under-deliver* is all too common an occurrence. *Under-promise and over-perform* is a much better model.

The second lesson is about compounding problems. This is far too common an occurrence too. I have little respect for salespeople who are less than fully honest with their customers when things don't go as planned. I had two conversations yesterday with representatives of a company that's been doing some work around my office. The salesperson told me that winter weather caused a delay in shipping some new fixtures. The installer told me that the salesperson ordered the wrong item, but they were expediting new parts, and still hoped to have the project finished before my deadline. He also asked me if I could live with one day later, which I easily can. But it's still unlikely that I'll ever deal with this salesperson and his company again.

The risk of getting caught in a lie should be a strong deterrent to telling one!

### Honest With Production

I know more than a few printing salespeople who lie about deadlines. If the customer wants it by the 10<sup>th</sup>, they tell production that it's needed by the 8<sup>th</sup>. "I have to," one of these salespeople told me. "The plant pays no attention to customer deadlines. They think it's OK to be a day late with every order. So I make sure that their day late is still a day early."

When I spoke with the Production Manager, he told me that his team does the best that they can. "The salespeople never ask us when we *can* deliver," he said. "They just tell us when we *have to* deliver. So we get multiple salespeople making commitments that were impossible in the first place, and we're on crazy rush schedules all the time. And it's not the late deliveries that really bother me because the customers seem to tolerate those just fine, making me wonder if we were really 'late.' No, what really gets me are the quality problems and other errors that result from the pressure we work under."

The real tragedy here is that the customer often hedges on the deadline in the first place. And then the salesperson, rather than buying time which may well be available—like the installer did in the example above—hedges even further. I tell salespeople all the time that part of their job is to give production *as much time* as possible. The more time there is to produce any order, the greater the chances of a positive outcome, which means a happy customer and a happy salesperson and a profitable company. I have little respect for salespeople who game the system. All too often, the customer and the company suffer. And by "the customer," I don't necessarily mean the customer who placed the order the salesperson lied about. Some other customer often suffers and possibly some other salesperson, who has to go to his/her customer and apologize for an error that was caused by the stress noted above.

### Honest With Yourself

Most printing salespeople are underperformers. Maybe I should put that in milder terms and just say that most printing salespeople could be selling more. Top performers could probably be selling at least a little more. At the other end of the scale, serious underperformers could definitely be selling more, and probably a lot more.

Why don't they? In my experience, a lot of the problem is an attitude of denial. *I'd be selling more if our prices were more competitive. I'd be selling more if production could meet my customers' deadlines. I'd be selling more if my customers were more aware of what they're really buying.*

The more honest answers might be: *I'd be selling more if I worked harder. I'd be selling more if I worked on my selling skills. I'd be selling more if I was more committed to the team.*

In the final analysis, I think this is the most damaging kind of dishonesty in printing sales. Even the top performers seem to find themselves in situations where they might have to stretch the truth with production or even with a customer from time to time. I don't endorse that, but often it's what I'd call a minor crime. Lying to yourself, though, and underperforming because of that is a serious transgression.