

Preparing For Your Proposal

Last month, I wrote about a strategy of offering proposals rather than simply quoting print jobs for prospects and customers. I noted how important it is to prepare for this strategy by asking the right questions at the point where you're taking the specifications of the project, and I promised to write more on that subject this month.

The key to success with this strategy is that your proposal must address your customer or prospect's most important concerns, otherwise you're just another printer hoping for a chance to print something. A big part of your challenge all the way through the selling process is to differentiate yourself from the "quoters"—especially considering the likelihood that at least one of those "quoters" will be offering lower prices than you will.

Find The Pain!

This entire strategy revolves around a fundamental question... *why should a customer or prospect buy from you?* The answer—at least in terms of your current customers—probably has something to do with *wanting* to buy from you, and the most likely reason they *want* to buy from you is that you haven't caused them too much pain in the past. Think about your own relationships with suppliers. Sure, you buy from people and companies that you like, and you like to buy from the people and companies who offer you the lowest prices, but when it comes right down to it, don't you buy from the people and companies you trust not to cause you pain and aggravation?

There's been discussion in just about every segment of our industry about *de-commoditizing* printing—in other words, changing the perception that printing is a commodity product, which like all other commodity products should be purchased from the lowest priced supplier. Well, I've got news for you, printing *is* a commodity product, and the equation that proves that is just as simple as $1 + 1 = 2$. Paper is a commodity product and ink and toner are both commodity products, so therefore any combination of those ingredients must also be a commodity product. Fortunately, *printers* are not a commodity, and it's the *differentiation factor* that gives you the best chance of success with your proposals. And please note that I'm defining success as getting the job *and* getting your price.

If you go all the way back to the point where your current customers started buying from you, I'm betting that they saw you as the solution to some problem they'd been having with their previous printer. Now, if the only problem they were having was that they didn't like the other printer's pricing, you'll probably be in jeopardy as soon as someone comes along with lower pricing than yours. If there were other factors involved, though—quality, service, technical expertise or reliability factors—then you have something to talk about when they start to consider printers with lower prices.

Worst Case Scenario

I always wanted to prepare for my proposals by identifying the worst case scenario for the buyer. "What could go wrong on this project," I would ask, "and how much pain will it cause you personally if that worst case scenario occurs?" The idea here is pretty simple. You have to make them think about the risk in order to prepare them for your proposal. Remember, if there is no risk, you're in a commodity situation and you're probably going to lose if you don't have the lowest price. (Remember also that you'd better have a solid performance record when you tell a customer that there's less risk in buying from you!)

How does this strategy apply to proposals for prospects, people who have no first-hand performance experience with you? As I mentioned last month, it's a good idea to include testimonials from current customers in your proposal package. You still have to know, though, what the prospect's most important concerns are, and the time to be talking about those concerns goes all the way back to your first face-to-face meeting. I'm a very strong believer that your first face-to-face meeting should be all about learning about the prospect, not at all about making a "presentation" about your products and services and capabilities. Remember, you have to find the pain to win this game.

I recommend a first meeting strategy that involves four areas of questioning. First, I want to learn something about the company. Next, I want to learn something about the individual I'm talking to, hopefully the person who will be making the buying decision. Third, I want to learn about the company's printing needs. Fourth and finally, I want to learn about the buyer's relationships with his/her current printing supplier(s).

I've written before that in order to be considered a fully qualified prospect, whoever we're talking about has to meet three criteria. First, they must buy exactly the kind of printing you sell. Second, they must buy enough of it to make your pursuit of them worthwhile. Third—and ultimately the most important consideration—they must show some interest in buying from you. The questions about the company, the individual and the printing will help you to

qualify a prospect in terms of the first and second criteria. The questions about the other printers will allow you to qualify your prospect in terms of the all-important third criteria. Another thing I've said and written many times before is that if they have no problems, you have no opportunity. No pain, no gain!

If you're wondering exactly what questions you should be asking on your first appointments with prospects, I wrote an article for *Quick Printing* quite a few years ago describing "15 Pretty Good Questions." You can find it in your back-issues file (*QP*, September 1993) or in the article archives at my website: www.davefellman.com. As you'll see, these aren't project-specific questions, but I also think that the your best case selling scenario has you holding your first conversations with potential customers at a point where there's no immediate project pending.

That concept seems backwards to many salespeople, who consider anyone who has something to quote on to be a hot prospect—even the people who are only asking for comparison quotes on projects they've printed in the past. It's not a foreign concept to the real winners in printing sales, though. Those salespeople know that the more relationship you can build before you have to start quoting prices, the better off you are!

Bottom Line

Ultimately, you're going to have to quote a price before a prospect gives you that first job, and often before a customer gives you a big job. The whole point of this proposal vs. quote strategy—and the research that goes into it—is to give you something to say when your prospect or customer comes back at you with a price objection. It's all about being positioned to say something like this:

"Well, Mr. Jones, you might remember me asking you all those questions about the worst-case scenario on this project, and how much pain that would cause you personally. When I calculated this price, I took all of that into consideration. Now, I could certainly lower the price by cutting a few corners, and I'm wondering if that's what the other printers have done, trying to present you with really attractive prices like they have. How do you feel, though, about corners getting cut?"

I can't promise you that this strategy will work every time, but at least it gives you something to work with. In the business of selling, that's all you can really ask for, and the good news is that sometimes it's enough to get the job *and* get your price.