

Playing Defense Against Customer Loss

As part of my seminar on *Building Sales Inside The Printshop*, I've been challenging quick printers with this statement: "You've already got all of the customers you need," I say, "to double your business."

The point I'm trying to make with that statement is that most customers buy only a fraction of what they *could be* buying from you. Maybe doubling your business is a stretch, but I hope you'll accept the idea that if you could cash in more of a typical customer's printing and copying needs, you probably do have enough customers—right now!—to increase your total sales volume substantially.

Well, not long ago, one quick printer raised his hand at that point in the seminar and made this comment. "In my situation," he said, "it feels like more of a challenge to keep from losing our customers than to sell more to them."

With that comment in mind, it seemed like an article on customer-keeping strategy might be a good idea.

Playing Defense

One of the maxims of the sports world is that championships in the major team sports are won with defense. The offensive part of the game may be a little more glamorous—and pay better—but it will always be true that you're likely to win if you can keep the other team from scoring.

In the business of selling printing, offense relates to gaining new customers. Every time you make that first sale and turn a prospect into a customer, you've accomplished the quick printing equivalent of a touchdown or a home run.

But scoring isn't everything. In order to win in the long run, it's also true that you have to keep the other teams from scoring against you. In other words, you have to gain customers *and keep them* in order to win in the printing game. *Defense!*

Customer Service

The most obvious element of defense for a quick printing company is the activity that's usually called *customer service*. In theory, if you provide satisfactory customer service, your customers will stay happy with you...and stay with you! That theory sometimes breaks down, though, over a conflicting definition of that word *satisfactory*.

The printers who seem to do the best job of keeping their customers are the ones who understand that there can be no fixed definition of customer service. It changes from customer to customer, and often from situation to situation within an individual customer. One of the most common reasons for a printer to lose a long-time customer is that the customer's service needs changed while the printer didn't.

How do you defend against that? By making sure that at least someone is focused on the customer's *business* instead of just the customer's printing. A very common complaint from customers is that printers start to take them for granted. The quick printer or his or her salesperson asks a lot of questions and then makes a lot of promises during the effort to convince that customer to come on board. After a while, many customers say, the process of understanding their needs seems to stop, and the printer's only interest seems to be self-serving...*have you got any jobs for me to print today?*

Executive Involvement

When I say to keep *someone* focused on the customer's overall business needs, I don't necessarily mean that it has to be the salesperson or customer service person who has the most direct contact with the account. In many ways, I'd rather see someone more senior in your organization handling that responsibility. When a shop manager, sales manager, or even the owner goes out occasionally to meet with customers on the issue of basic business needs, I think it says something much stronger in terms of the quick printer's commitment to the customer.

I've been out on hundreds of "executive" sales calls that were arranged with a phone conversation that went something like this. "The way we're set up," I'd say, "your salesperson and/or customer service rep are responsible for handling the details on your individual projects. I'd like to come out and spend a few minutes with you to be sure that our *entire* company is meeting your *overall* needs, and to see if we can come up with some new ways to make us even more valuable to you."

That can work even for the smallest shop, where the owner is also the salesperson. Tell your customer that you'd like to come out with a different "hat" on every once in a while and talk about these larger business issues. I think you'll gain a lot of credibility if you admit that it's easy to start taking a valuable customer for granted. And I think you'll find that this sort of defense builds a wall around a customer that no competitor will easily get through.

Self-Defense

This type of executive involvement, by the way, is also part of the answer to one of many outside-sales-oriented quick printers' greatest fears...that a salesperson will leave and take a substantial chunk of business away to another printer. The best way to defend against that is minimize the importance of any single individual in the customer relationship by broadening the level of contact between the customer and your organization.

In my own career as a sales manager and sales/marketing executive, I always made it a point to get to know and *be known to* as many customers as possible...certainly to the most important ones! Beyond that, I made it policy that we would encourage contact between customers and anyone in our organization. I routinely sent inside customer service people out into the field with the outside salespeople so that customers would know these key contacts as more than just voices over a phone. I've even sent line production people out, and I never hesitated to bring them along if we were hosting any sort of social event.

This kind of self-defense strategy allows you to put a very strong contingency plan into effect. If a salesperson *does* leave you for another printer, you are positioned to take a familiar team of people right out to those customers and say, "Yes Jack is a great guy, and we're sorry he's leaving us. But we want you to remember that there are quite a few people besides Jack who have been taking care of your printing and copying needs. And the rest of us want to keep your business!"

Quality Issues

As every quick printer knows, quality is another part of the equation that produces happy customers. Half of what you have to do to keep from losing customers because of quality failures is to keep those failures from happening...*quality control!*

The other half is to react properly when a quality failure does get out of your shop and into the hands of your customer. The full meaning of that statement is an article by itself, but the short description of "properly" is to acknowledge the problem, discuss the possible solutions, and implement the best one...as quickly as all of that can take place!

That strategy will serve you well with the vast majority of the problems you know about. But what about the quality failures that customers *don't* come back and complain about? Research of buyer behavior shows that most quality problems are *not* brought to the printer's attention. Instead, the dissatisfied customer quietly changes printers.

Gripe Cards

I know quite a few quick printers who use comment cards as part of their overall business strategy. They either pack these cards in with the order or the invoice, or mail them directly to the person who placed the order. In some cases, I can tell you with a great deal of certainty that the quick printers are using the comment cards as a means to identify some of those "quiet" quality failures. In other cases, though, I'm equally sure that the primary purpose of the card is to "fish" for positive comments.

Now, those positive comments have value! They are *testimonials* to your quality and service that can be used in a variety of ways. But please consider this: Which has more immediate value to you...to be told by one customer that you're great, or to be told by another customer that you're not so great, and if you don't do something about it, you may very well lose me as a customer!

If you're serious about uncovering those "quiet" problems that can cost you customers, I suggest that you build that into the design of your comment card. I would design it as a "gripe" card, and I would clearly say: *"We love it when customers say nice things about us, but that's not the purpose of this card. What we really want is for you to tell us if we let you down in any way. If you are anything less than 100% satisfied with this print or copy job, please let us know!"*

What's the best way to get a "defense device" like this into the hands of your customer? I think you should pack it in with the job, and if the job is going out in more than one carton, mark the one that has the "gripe" card in it: *Open This Box First!* To make sure that the card gets to the right place, you might say something like this on it: *"Please examine the quality of this job to be sure it meets your expectations. If you're not the person who originally placed this order, please pass this card and a sample of the job along to the person who did."*

The Bottom Line

Another of the things that research on customer buying habits shows is that printing customers don't generally want to change printing suppliers. They like stability and long-term relationships, just like you do. But history shows that they will change printers *if the printer forces them to!*

The key to keeping your customers is to play good defense. First, stay in touch with your customers and their business needs, and make sure that you change as those needs change. Second, broaden that base of contact

between your company and your customers. Third, defend against quality failures with quality control. And fourth, have a means to find and fix any quality—or service—failures that escape your quality control procedures.

If you can do those things—and you can!—then I can return with confidence to my original statement and challenge: “You already have all the customers you need to double your business!”