History Lessons

The end of one year and the beginning of another tends to make many people reflective. We look back on our successes, and on our mistakes, and we look forward with hope toward the New Year.

In the printing industry in the 90's, though, hope is not enough. Especially if 1992 was not a good year for you. If you want to be in better shape next year at this time, you'd better also have a plan. And as part of that plan, you need to understand what went wrong this year. Someone much wiser than me once said that those who don't learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it.

Make A List

The end of the year is a good time to sit down and make a list of the major problems you faced throughout the year. In fact, I think it's a good idea to make a couple of lists. The sum total of what you can learn from a few hours of introspection can really help you to manage in 1993 and beyond.

When I first start putting my own lists together, I try to separate the problems my business faced into three categories: sales problems, internal problems, and external problems. Sales problems are problems with customers, including the issues of getting new customers and keeping existing ones. Internal problems concern employees, procedures, and equipment. External problems are things you have no real control over. More than a few Southern printers will have Hurricane Andrew on that list for 1992.

If I do it right, these three separate lists will identify all of the major problems my business faced in the last year. My next step is to try to combine the lists to reflect the order of importance that each of these problems had on my overall business results. It's an exercise in prioritization, really. I want to understand exactly which of these problems hurt me the most.

Checklist

When this single, prioritized list is complete, I use it as a checklist to determine whether or not each problem has been resolved. With the ones that get checked off, I spend some time thinking about *how* they were resolved, especially about whether I might have done a better job of resolving the problem if I'd had the benefit of hindsight. I want to learn from everything, especially my mistakes.

(By the way, I hope you recognize that *resolve* and *solve* are not the same word. Ideally, you will *solve* most of your problems. That means taking action and bringing them to a resolution that's positive for you. When a problem has been *resolved*, it means it's not there anymore, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you came out of it without major damage.)

The problems that *haven't* been resolved get even more attention than the ones that have. Because I recognize that these are the greatest—and most immediate—threats to my business.

You know, when you come right down to it, *problem solving* is an activity—a responsibility—that belongs on every single job description in a printing organization. It's part of the job for everybody, from a salesperson trying to get through to a difficult prospect, to a press operator wrestling with the ink coverage on a large solid, to the owner dealing with overall business issues.

I doubt that there's anybody in your organization who wouldn't benefit from a greater understanding of the problems of the last year. I think you'd do well to dedicate some time to that process as 1992 comes to a close.

And then, use what you've learned to *attack* the problems that remain! Don't just *hope* that things will change. That's the best way I know of to increase the likelihood that your situation will be worse at this time next year.

Kick-Off Meetings

Another of the things you can do to get the new year off to a good start is to schedule kick-off meetings, both internally and with your most important customers. An internal kick-off can be a great forum for sharing your goals and objectives with your staff, and for introducing the plans and the programs that will help you all achieve those goals.

Of course, that requires that you have set those goals and objectives, and put a plan and programs together. I'm not going to nag you about that right now, though. I've probably done enough preaching for today.

I know many printers who've had a great deal of success with kick-off meetings with customers. It's all part of the *partnering* issue that I've written about before. You can use a meeting like this to provide a sort of a summary of the previous year's activity, even to the point of preparing a portfolio with actual samples of each project you printed for the customer. This idea is to remind the customer what a great job you did for them last year—and to say *thank*

you—and then go into a discussion of their printing/marketing plans for the upcoming year, and discuss how you can be of even greater value.

Ideally, both parties should be represented by a *team* at these kick-off meetings. It's a great opportunity to broaden the base of contact between printer and customer. Any number of variables will determine the actual number of people who might be present, not the least of which are the sizes of the two organizations. But for the most important customers, I think it's a good idea that the printer's team include any salespeople and/or customer service people involved with the account, the sales manager, someone senior from production or administration, and the owner or top manager.

In the case of a small printing company, that may actually be only two people who wear a lot of hats. But that's OK, the point is not to overwhelm the client with bodies, it's to have all the key areas of your company represented. You can hold these meetings at your place or theirs. I particularly like the idea of *inviting* your most important customers to come to your plant or shop, but I wouldn't press the issue if a meeting on their site was more convenient for them, especially if that allowed more people from the client organization to take part.