

The Selling Factor

Though the title on your business card may say “president,” “owner,” or “manager,” it’s important to understand that in many situations, your functional title is “salesperson.” That’s especially true when you’re having that first conversation with a potential customer. And though you may never have thought in these terms before, the long-term success of your company will have at least as much to do with your abilities as a salesperson as it will with the quality of the printing you produce and the level of service you provide.

What Is Selling?

Do you like the idea of being a salesperson? There’s no question that there is a stigma attached to the profession of selling in our society. When you say “salesman,” the immediate image most people draw up is a car salesperson, and by its very nature, the challenge of selling cars is a high-pressure endeavor which brings out the worst in most of its practitioners. But just as there are highly professional quick printers as compared to “garage printers,” there are also many highly professional salespeople in this world who are much more concerned with helping the customer to get what he or she needs, not simply what the salesperson wants to sell.

And that’s the essence of selling in your business...gaining an understanding of what the customer is trying to accomplish, and helping to turn that vision into reality. It’s exactly the same selling situation, whether you’re talking about selling a business card or a two, three or four-color brochure.

Most Important Factor

A great deal of research has gone into buyer motivation. The results show that purchasing decisions can be broken down into two general categories: commodity purchases and the purchase of custom products and services. The most important factors in commodity purchasing are price, convenience, and “liking” the salesperson. The most important factor in the purchase of custom products and services is *trust and confidence* in the salesperson.

Basic black-on-white photocopies may be a commodity product to most buyers, but a more complex level of design and printing is not. That component of your “product line” is definitely a custom product/service. So...when you have to put your selling hat on...the most important thing to remember is that your foremost challenge is to gain the trust and confidence of the person you’re talking to.

How do you do that? I’d like to suggest a three-part strategy: first, to look like you know what you’re doing; next, to sound like you know what you’re doing; and finally, to act like you know what you’re doing.

Looking Good

The most obvious consideration of looking like you know what you’re doing may be physical appearance, but that’s not all I’m talking about here. It is, however, a good place to start. Imagine that you have something that needs to be printed. You pick two nearby quick print shops out of the Yellow Pages and get in the car to check them out. At one shop, you talk to a person who’s wearing a business suit—or at least something that would be considered casual business attire—at the other shop, you talk to a person wearing jeans or grubby work pants and an ink-stained T-shirt. On the issue of appearance alone, which shop seems most worthy of your trust and confidence.

If you say that appearance shouldn’t matter, you should think again. Appearance does matter to many people. The less “business-like” quick printer may actually be more likely to provide high levels of quality and service, but he/she may never get the chance to prove it if the customer doesn’t take immediate confidence in his or her appearance. The most professional—and successful—salespeople in custom products/services situations understand very well that you only get one chance to make a good first impression. And don’t forget that the physical appearance of your shop—not just the people in it—counts heavily toward that first impression.

But looking good is not just a matter of physical appearance. The appearance of your marketing and promotional material is also a factor in looking like you know what you’re doing. It’s a common lament that personal computers, laser and ink-jet printers, and inexpensive graphics software make everyone think they’re professional designers. The fact is that much of the promotional material developed by small business people—quick printers included!—is pretty ugly...and not very trust-and-confidence inspiring. It’s especially important for a quick printer’s marketing and promotional materials to reflect a high level of “graphics smarts.”

A third consideration of looking good is your sample materials. Many potential customers are going to want to see samples of your work. Obviously, the print quality must be representative of the expectations of the customer and/or the demands of the project, but it's also worth thinking about the "presentation" of your samples. This is an area where little things can make a huge difference. You'll make "trust-and-confidence" points if your samples are carefully labeled and presented in an attractive package.

Sounding Good

The secret to sounding like you really know what you're doing is to talk as little as possible. That may sound like a contradiction, but it is the absolute key to "consultive" selling. The idea is to *ask* your customers what they're looking for; to get *them* to talk enough so that you completely understand the goals and objectives of the project, the concerns of everyone involved, and even the budget they're working under. Your best selling strategy is to ask lots of questions, because if you ask the right questions—and listen to the answers, which many sales managers and trainers will tell you is a critical failing for many salespeople—the people you're talking to will tell you *two* things: what they're looking for *and* how to sell it to them. Any competent salesperson will tell you that once you identify the hot buttons, the challenge of selling becomes much easier.

Many inexperienced outside salespeople worry about making effective sales "presentations." The idea of making a "canned" and rehearsed presentation is much more appropriate to commodity selling. The key word in custom products/services selling is *conversation*, and while you may not have a great deal of experience in making formal sales presentations, you should be a lot more comfortable with the idea of holding a back-and-forth conversation with a potential customer. As with any other conversation, if there's something you want or need to know...ask!

Another consideration of sounding good, by the way, is the way you answer your telephone, and this is another area where little things can make a huge difference. A business-like greeting—whether "live" or from your answering machine or voice mail system—projects the image of a well-run business.

Acting Right

The issue of acting like you know what you're doing may start with returning phone calls promptly. One of the key complaints of consumers who use the Yellow Pages is that small-business service providers—a category into which most quick printers will fit—are notoriously slow in returning phone calls. Think of your own buying habits. You don't go to the Yellow Pages when you have time to kill, you go to the Yellow Pages when you want to buy something or get information that might very well lead to buying something. There is a sense of urgency on your part, so isn't the supplier who respects that sense of urgency the one most likely to gain your trust and confidence?

If a telephone inquiry leads to setting up an outside appointment, the next consideration of acting like you know what you're doing is to be there on time, with whatever materials might be required to take the next step with that potential customer. And, of course, looking like you know what you're doing supports the face-to-face first impression you'll make. (Looking good in the Yellow Pages—or in other marketing or promotional materials—may have been the reason you got the telephone inquiry in the first place!)

Never Stop Selling

Looking, sounding, and acting like you know what you're doing in the "selling stage" can help you to do more of what you really want to do...design, print, make copies, and collect money from your customers! But here's a final thought for today: Selling—defined as the process of building and maintaining the trust and confidence of customers—never stops in a successful business. Once you win the first job, you have to *show* that you know what you're doing.

The good news is that showing it creates its own selling opportunities, first and foremost the opportunity to do *more* business with that customer. Showing it also paves the way for testimonial letters and referrals, which can also be very powerful trust-and-confidence builders. When it's done right, "selling" can trigger and maintain a never-ending pattern of profitable growth.