

Changes In The Weather

There's an old saying that "change" is the only constant in the world. There's another old saying that most people would rather go to the dentist than change the way they've been doing things. I don't know about that personally, but I do know that I'm a creature of habit, just like you probably are.

Still, when things outside of your control start to change, you might be wise to change with them. Because the alternative is to be left behind, and that can be a lot more painful than making changes in the ways you do things!

Change In Practice

What do you do when a customer starts asking for quotes on printing and/or copying projects that never required a price in advance before? This is a tough question, and it reflects a situation that's coming up more and more often in the marketplace. Quite a few printers have been faced with this problem over the last few years.

So how do you solve the problem? Well, *solve* is probably the wrong word. I don't know of any perfect solution that will keep all of your customers with you once they start exploring the possibility of lower prices. Unfortunately, the chances are pretty good that they'll find a printer or copyshop willing to sell whatever it is at a price lower than you've been charging.

But the best way I know of to *address* the problem is to meet it head on. Go out to any and every customer who asks you to quote on something for the first time—something that never required a quote before—and say something like this:

"From the fact that you're asking for a price on this project now, I'm assuming that you want to explore the possibility of reducing the cost of getting it printed or copied somehow. So there are two things I want you to know. First, you shouldn't be surprised if some other printer offers you a lower price than we do, or a lower price than we've been charging you all along. It's never been our philosophy to be the cheapest printer or copyshop in town, only the best and the most dependable. Secondly, if there's a need to take some cost out of this project, well then, let's talk about that and see what kind of ideas we come up with."

Solid Defense

The key to addressing this situation is to establish a solid defense by minimizing the appeal of a lower price from another printer. It's important to remind the customer that there's been a reason all along that he or she has been buying from you...the most important reason, trust and confidence in your quality and service! You want this person to end up thinking, "Well, I might save a few dollars here by switching suppliers, but what am I risking?" (This, of course, assumes that you have been delivering quality and service that's worthy of a premium price. If you haven't, you have another problem altogether!)

In the second part of your statement, you are reinforcing your expertise, which is another reason for doing business with you instead of some competitor. And I hope you'll realize that taking some cost out of a job and lowering your prices are two completely different things. Isn't it true that you can very often apply your *product knowledge* to a situation like this and suggest a better—less costly—way to run the job? A different paper stock, for example, or by eliminating some other component that adds significantly to the cost.

You can often "pre-empt" a competitor by taking this proactive approach to reducing cost, but it's also been my experience that exploring options like these sometimes leads the customer right back to the original specs, with the understanding that *this is really what I want, and I now understand that this is what it will cost to be sure that the job will absolutely be done right!*

Risk Factor

Think back to the element of risk I raised a moment ago. To most people in a buying situation, risk is the "flip side" of trust and confidence. Some people are risk-takers by nature, but some definitely aren't!

I'm sorry to say that I can't help you much with people who are willing to take on some risk in order to reduce the cost of their printing and copying. These people will try a printer or copyshop with lower prices if they can find one—and they probably can once they start looking!

I can help you, though, with some of the people who may not have thought about how much risk they may be taking on in switching suppliers. My suggestion for those people is pretty simple. Ask them two questions: "*If something could go wrong with this project, what would it be?*" And then: "*If that were to happen, how much of a problem would it be for you personally?*"

When you get right down to it, most people are motivated by self-interest. But it's probably also fair to say that most people don't consider all of the important factors before making decisions. (Can you honestly say that you always do?) The "practical reality" of this discussion of human nature is that smart salespeople know that it's often good strategy to raise the "risk factor."

Once you've established that there is risk, hit hard on the idea that continuing to do business with you minimizes the risk. Point to your "track record," and anything special you've done in the past to make your customer look good.

A wise printer doesn't leave the understanding of "risk vs. reward" to chance, especially when he or she is threatened with a change in the weather!

Another Change

Here's another change-related question I've been asked a lot lately. What does it take to be an effective printing salesperson, and how is that changing? Many people seem to think that having a "sales personality" is somehow important, but I don't think that's the key. In my experience, the most critical elements of success in printing sales are *knowledge-based*. The most outgoing and enthusiastic salesperson in the world will have trouble selling printing if he/she doesn't rate highly in what I think of as the *Printing Sales Knowledge Base*. And this knowledge base is changing rapidly as the printing industry races toward its future.

Product Knowledge

The Printing Sales Knowledge Base has four components, the first of which is *product knowledge*. In the "old days," product knowledge simply meant that a salesperson had to know about ink and paper, and about the capabilities of his/her company's printing and bindery equipment. It's not nearly that simple anymore. The *technical product knowledge* requirement has already grown to include a degree of computer literacy that has left many "old timers" behind. To that, you must now add the consideration of *applications product knowledge*, which deals with the ways in which printing is used by your customers in their own businesses: marketing, advertising and corporate communications.

The most successful salesperson of the future will be capable of addressing the *purpose* of the printed piece, and capable of helping clients to create printing that will actually perform to its purpose better. I believe that graphics and design skills, copywriting skills, and basic marketing expertise will—and, in fact, already have—become important success factors for printing salespeople.

Market Knowledge

The second component of the Printing Sales Knowledge Base is *market knowledge*, which refers to the things a printing salesperson will have to know about the market itself; about the printer's typical customer—and your specific customers!—and about trends in the printing marketplace.

For years we've been seeing trends toward greater use of color and shorter run lengths. We're now seeing the second and third stages of the very powerful trend toward customers designing their own marketing materials on desktop computers and entering their printing orders via "digital originals." The result is a situation where market knowledge defines the next level of product knowledge...the printing salesperson must become familiar and comfortable with whatever technology the market latches onto, because the market ultimately drives the flow of business.

Operational Knowledge

The third component of the Printing Sales Knowledge Base is *operational knowledge*, which simply refers to the way you want your printing company to run. How is an order entered? What is a "normal" delivery? Who does the pricing, and how much latitude, if any, does the salesperson have in adjusting those prices? How do you want your salesperson to dress when out on sales calls? What are the parameters for taking prospects or customers out to lunch. Who's responsible for picking up artwork, or getting proofs back into the shop, or making rush deliveries?

In my experience, this sort of *operational knowledge* is the component that gets the least attention in training salespeople. The result can be that the salesperson is never fully integrated into the organization; never made part of the team. What you usually get then is friction between the salesperson and everyone else, and the friction is only made worse as customers—who are often viewed by the production side of a printing business as extensions of the salespeople—demand faster and faster turnaround and different ways of doing things.

Selling Technique

The fourth and final component of the Printing Sales Knowledge Base is *selling technique*...how to prospect, qualify, and then convince the right kind of people to become your customers. Even this knowledge requirement is

changing as customer needs and attitudes change, and printing companies are forced to examine sometimes very specific industry/market niches that they are interested in—and capable of—serving.

The simple truth is that you have to sell differently to different customer types, and the forces of technology are segmenting the entire printing marketplace as never before. Low-tech salespeople and “traditional” printing companies aren’t having much luck with leading edge consumers. But by the same token, many high-tech salespeople and leading edge printing companies aren’t having much better luck in pulling their “traditional” customers along into making full use of their digital capabilities.

Bottom Line

The bottom line is that *everything* is changing...but you already know that! I’m sure that what you really want to know is *what do you do about it?* If I were you, I would do three things to ensure my survival.

First, I would continue to read this magazine from cover to cover every month. Most profitable and successful quick printers seem to agree that there is no better resource in this industry than *Quick Printing* magazine. Second, I would join PrintImage International (assuming that you’re not a member already.) The organization formerly known as NAQP has unquestionably been through a “down” period, but I think that PI is now very much on the rise. The main reason for that is that PI’s current headquarters staff clearly understands “member service,” and part of what that means is preparing members for the future. (NOTE: This was true in 1999. I’m not sure it’s still true in 2011, when “NAQP” operates as a sub-group of NAPL. Still, it shouldn’t hurt you to be part on any industry association!)

Third, if I were a franchisee (like a significant number of participants in the industry), I would get fully involved with my franchise. That means both with the franchisor and with fellow franchisees. The best among the franchisors also understand member service (though perhaps it would be more accurate to call it “customer service” in this case.) From what I see, the best of the franchisors are highly committed to “customer success,” and also highly frustrated that their “customers” aren’t taking advantage of all they have to offer. If I were a franchisee, I’d be working hard to get my money’s worth from my franchisor!

The real bottom line? Take advantage of all of your resources. There may even be more of them than you think! That’s how you increase the chances that the changes you make are for the better!