

Sales Management Is An Attitude

There's probably no subject dearer to my heart than that of managing salespeople. It's an endeavor in which I've had some of my greatest successes, and some of my greatest frustrations. Effective sales management can be the difference between growing your business, treading water...or worse. And, except for being about the most difficult thing in the whole world, it's not that hard to do.

Quick and small commercial printers tell me all the time that "We're too small to have a sales manager." The first point I want to make is that it's not a question of size, it's a question of responsibility. I don't care how many people you manage. I don't care if you have a formal title. Whether you usually call yourself the owner, or the president, or just Mom or Pop in a mom and pop organization, if you're the one who has ultimate responsibility for bringing sales in the door, you are the sales manager. If I can get you to think in those terms, I feel like I've gone a long way toward convincing you that the sales manager hat is one of the most important that you—or somebody in your organization—has to wear.

Who Is The Salesforce?

The job of the sales manager is to manage the salesforce and the overall sales effort. Let's talk about the people first. Who makes up the salesforce? I've had more than a few owners of small printing companies tell me that "I'm the only one who goes out to sell." But how about the people who stay inside and sell? If you were to tell me that your staff is made up of a couple of press operators, several bindery personnel, a typesetter and/or layout artist, a customer-service person, an accounting/administrative person, and yourself, I would say to you that your salesforce includes all of those people. Think about it this way...you and your customer-service person may be the primary promise-makers, but everyone else is a promise-keeper. That's all part of the sales process, and all of those people need sales management if they're going to function at a superior level.

What skills are required to be an effective sales manager? No big deal, you just have to be a combination of teacher, coach, printing expert, parish priest, hero, villain, and mind reader. But read those over again, and think about that word "skill." By my definition, the only "skill" among those seven is printing expertise. The rest are *attitudes*. And here's a key point...it doesn't take a great deal of skill to be an effective sales manager. The most important thing is an attitude that *you're going to find ways to help those people do their jobs well*.

It's not all sweetness and light (see "villain" above), sometimes you do have to hit them over the head with the blanket cylinder. It's a matter of whatever it takes. It's also a matter of dealing with individuals on an individual basis, which I view as a luxury that many of you have in a small or medium-sized shop that the senior sales manager at R.R. Donnelly—or any other company among the nation's largest printers—certainly doesn't have. You should be able to deal with 3, or 5, or 10 people as individuals. You can't do that when your salesforce numbers in the thousands.

Reasonable Expectations.

Is there more to the essential attitude behind effective sales management? I've found it important to remember that it takes time to create a solid customer relationship. Too many sales managers place unreasonable expectations on their salespeople—especially their new salespeople—to create immediate results. They often compound that problem by asking new salespeople to go out and bring in business from the biggest and most visible companies in town. This about that, especially in terms of the fact that every established company in your area already is already doing business with at least one printing company, and very likely dealing with one of that company's most talented and experienced salespeople. How reasonable is the attitude that your rookie salesperson could walk in and take the business away from that experienced and talented salesperson and the company he/she represents?

Sales management is a very broad topic, and I've only scratched the surface of it here. But I hope that those of you who run small or medium-sized shops will at least embrace the idea that the sales manager "hat" is one of the specific hats you wear, and that you have certain responsibilities to your business and to your people as the sales manager. I think just getting that far will give some of you a new slant on what it takes to make your business grow.