

Solids, Liquids, Gases, Players and Price Monsters

It's been my experience that all printing buyers will fit into one of five categories. I call them *solids*, *liquids*, *gases*, *players* and *price monsters*. *Solids* are happy with their current supplier and they're not going to change. *Liquids* are generally happy with their current supplier, but they'll talk to you, and they might buy from you if you convince them that you're better than what they have now. *Gases* are unhappy with their current supplier, and most of them have already made the decision to try a new printer the next time around.

Players spread their work around, and they're price sensitive to the degree that they'll usually give the order to the printer in their "stable" who quotes the lowest price on any given project. They won't have the cheapest printer in town in that group, though, because that would make them *price monsters*—people who make all their decisions based strictly and only on price.

Why is this important? Mostly because it tells you who you should be spending your time and resources on, in terms of both prospecting and customer maintenance.

Current Customers

Let's start with your current customers. Hopefully you have lots of *solids*, but it's dangerous to assume that. A better strategy would be to simply ask them! I've had a lot of success asking my customers to gauge the *temperature* of our relationship. A temperature of 37 would mean a strong and healthy relationship, while 34 might indicate some weakness. Think of it this way. A customer who gauges the temperature of your relationship at 37 is a *solid*. A customer who places the temperature at 34 is probably a *liquid*. Here's another way to look at this. A *solid* tells your competitors "I'm happy with my current printer." A *liquid* says "sure, let's talk."

Now, how about *gases*, *players* and *price monsters* among your current customers? There's probably not much you can do with the *gases*, unless you can identify their dissatisfaction issues immediately and do something about them. With the *players*, you must consider whether you're happy with the share of their business you're getting. The key here is to maintain a *profitable* share. You can probably get more business from *players* by lowering your prices, but I want you to question whether that's the best strategy. I'd much rather see you win a smaller share of profitable business from 10-12 individual *players* than win a larger share of less profitable business from just one or two. In other words, be looking for more good customers rather than settling for marginal ones.

That takes us to *price monsters*, who are marginal customers at best, and usually just bad ones. I suggest that you let the bad customers weaken your competitors.

Prospecting

As noted, you should always be looking for more good customers. It's sad, I think, that most printing salespeople don't do enough prospecting, and doubly sad that much of the prospecting they do is misdirected. I think too much time gets spent on *solids*, and on *players* who are really either *solids* or *price monsters*.

Let's start with the *players*. The typical printing salesperson seems to consider it a victory to get something to quote on. The distance between entertaining a quote and thinking seriously about buying from you can be vast, though. And you have to consider that the true *player* already has a stable of trusted suppliers. In other words, those are *solid* relationships! You don't win in those situations by reducing your prices until you get some action — if it works that way, you're dealing with a price monster! The real win is to find either a pain point or an added value point and to build a relationship around that.

Now consider this. There are no pain points or added value points with a true *solid*. They're already getting what they want and/or need from their current supplier(s)! That takes us straight to the only difference between a *solid* and a *liquid* — *liquids* will talk to you! And the reason they'll talk to you is that they have pain points, or that they're receptive to added value.

Do *solids* ever turn into *liquids*? Sure, so there is some value in attempting to stay on someone's radar in anticipation of a time when they're less-than-happy with their current supplier. Just recognize that that's a long term challenge. My advice is to go looking for *liquids*. If they'll talk to you, that gives you the opportunity to explore their wants and needs and problems and opportunities and possibly sell them on a better solution.

Something else to consider. When you gain a customer on that basis, that's pretty *solid*!