

Tipping Points

In an earlier column, I used the term “tipping points” to describe a pain point or hot button that might help you to wrestle a suspect or prospect away from their current supplier. The basic idea behind all consultative or “solutions-based” selling is to find something they’re less than 100% satisfied with, or something they would value but are not getting from the printer-in-place. The ability to relieve pain or solve a problem—or to simply offer a better way of doing things—provides you with a competitive advantage.

Unfortunately, an attractive *feature* is seldom enough to make the sale. The top achievers in printing sales know that you have to stress the resulting *benefit* as the difference between your company and your competitor. As I wrote in that earlier column, “We do a lot of full-color printing in run lengths from 50 to 500 using state-of-the-art digital printing equipment” is a feature of your business, but by itself, it’s not enough of a reason for most people to buy from you. “That gives us a significant advantage in meeting those fast turnaround requirements you’ve told me about” is a *benefit statement*, and that’s the point you need to drive home.

Two Issues

Fast can be a significant selling point, but how do you prove it? Most printing salespeople seem to favor the “give me a try and let me show you what I can do” strategy, but they’re usually disappointed with the result. My observation is that “give me a try” only works about 10% of the time.

Want to double or triple the effectiveness of that strategy? All that takes is to start saying “give *us* a try, and let *us* show you what *we* can do.” Granted, you have to sell yourself in any sales situation, but it’s a lot easier to sell yourself when you sell the idea that there’s a whole team behind you. My observation is that “give *us* a try” works 20-30% of the time.

Want to double or triple the effectiveness of *that* strategy? Show me some evidence that you’re as fast as you say you are. Show me testimonials or case studies. Get me talking to current customers who will attest to your performance. My observation is that a promise supported by solid evidence works more than 60% of the time—*provided that the performance of the printer-in-place was a problem in the first place!* Remember, *faster* is of little value when your competitor is fast enough.

I hope you’ll see that there are two issues here. The first is to identify a problem. The second is to convince your prospect that you’re the solution to that problem. “Give me a try” probably won’t cut it, but “take a look at this evidence as to why I think we’re worth a try” might very well work for you. By the way, I’ve had a lot of success in my own selling career telling people what I think, and then asking them what they think. That’s how you build a dialog which often leads to them telling you exactly what those hot buttons are.

Overcoming Inertia

A lot of printing sales situations are decided by inertia. In other words, they like you well enough, and they like what they’ve heard from you, but they’re not desperately unhappy with their current supplier, so the easiest thing to do is to keep buying from your competitor. It’s a fact that many printing buyers view printing as a commodity.

I have a client who has made a significant commitment to being “green”, and has found this to be an effective tipping point in some of these inertia situations. When all other things seem to be equal, we’ve taught his salespeople to ask whether “green” is important to the buyer. If the answer is yes, they tell the company’s “green story” and then ask if it’s enough to make the difference. This strategy doesn’t always work, but sometimes it’s just enough of a tipping point to move the buyer away from the “easy” decision.

Please note that they don’t lead with their “green story.” It’s held in reserve, for situations when a little more differentiation is required. As I wrote last month, most printing salespeople can’t seem to wait to shoot off all of their big sales and marketing guns, and that’s usually a bad strategy.

Now, you may not be as “green” as this particular printing company, but there are probably features of your business that can provide you with some tipping power. Local vs. out-of-town or out-of-state? A woman-owned or other minority-owned business? Supporters of specific causes or charities? Remember, sometimes all it takes is just a little more weight to tip the scales in your favor.

New Customer Appreciation Package

Here’s another tipping point idea, which I first wrote about a few years ago. It’s intended for a prospect you’ve been working on for 4-6 months, specifically for someone who’s given you positive signs, but the first order has

never materialized. The idea is to put together a “New Customer Appreciation Package”—a collection of items with a value between \$20-\$30, which might include candy, baked goods, gift certificates, ad specialty items, etc. Then you go to your prospect and say: “You know, we have a New Customer Appreciation Package that we give out to our new customers, and we generally make a bunch of them up at a time, and I made one for you a couple of months ago when I thought you were getting very close to giving me that first order. I’ve been looking at the thing for the last couple of months now, and today I decided that I’m going to give it to you anyway, even though you haven’t actually earned it yet. But hopefully you will soon, right?”

Please understand, I’m not suggesting that you adopt a policy where you give a gift package to all your new customers. I’m suggesting it as an *incentive* to get people to make the decision to buy from you. Again, sometimes it just takes a little more weight to tip the scales in your favor.

New Customer Discount

Here’s one more tipping point possibility: a first order/new customer discount. There’s no question that money talks, and the opportunity to save some can be a powerful incentive to many buyers.

There are two things I want you to think about before using this strategy, though. The first is that it establishes a precedent, and a sharp buyer might leverage that into a permanently discounted pricing level. The second is that those who win on price very often lose on price when a lower price comes along, and it always seems to, doesn’t it?. If you’re looking for loyal customers, competing on price is the wrong way to do that.

If nothing else, I hope you’ll use a first order/new customer discount as your *last* resort in looking for a tipping point.