

Setting The Mood

In last month's column, I wrote that the ideal printing sales conversation should be built around a single question. *If you could change anything about your printing or your dealings with your printing supplier(s), what would it be?* I also wrote that I'm not sure you can walk in, sit down, and ask that question without first creating an environment that will get you an honest answer. Let's talk about that today.

Four-Part Conversation

I think that "ideal printing sales conversation" should have four parts. Part 1 is about the company you're calling on. Part 2 is about the individual(s) you're meeting with. Part 3 is about the printing you'll be competing for, and Part 4 is about *what would you change if you could?* I think it's important to follow that order, and that's because Parts 1 and 2 especially are about setting a mood, and creating that environment for an open and honest answer to the ultimate question.

So let's start by talking about the company, and let's *not* ever start by saying, "So what does this company do?" I saw that happen recently, and the buyer's response was, "We don't spend much time with someone who doesn't make an effort to learn that before he walks into my office." I hope you'll agree that a little research is called for before meeting with a prospect.

In that research, I'm hoping to find something that will give the person I'm talking to an opportunity to brag on his or her company. Here's an example: "I've been following your company on Facebook, and I saw that you received a 'corporate good citizenship' award. Were you personally involved in that?" That 10-second question got the prospect talking animatedly for 3-4 minutes.

Here's a good rule of thumb for any salesperson. *The more they're talking and the less you're talking, the better you're doing, especially early in the game.* The key here is to *engage* your prospect in conversation.

About The Individual(s)

OK, let's say that you engage in a few successful minutes of conversation about the company. Next, I want to transition to a few minutes of conversation about the individual. But this is *not* where you ask which football team the prospect supports. You'll have opportunity for "social" conversation later. This is a business conversation, and there are two things I want to learn at this stage. First, whether the person I'm talking to is empowered to buy from me, and second, whether he or she will likely have interest in buying from me.

To address the first issue, I like to ask, "How long have you been working here?" I've found that long tenure is a good indication of authority. But do you see how this question cloaks your true objective inside a question that should be perceived as sincere interest? Let's compare that to another approach, asking bluntly whether the person you're talking to has the authority you need. Do you agree that a question like that could destroy the mood?

To address the second issue, I like to ask, "How much time do you spend dealing with printing salespeople, and is this a part of your job that you enjoy?" The answer I'm hoping for is a lot of time, but not a lot of enjoyment. Do you see how that would provide interest in making a change from the status quo?

Qualifying

To this point, if all has gone well, you've done a little bit of talking and a lot of listening. I want you to continue that for another few minutes, but now I want you to learn about the prospect's printing needs. This is really about qualifying, because before you invest a lot of time in a prospect, I want you to be sure that they have enough volume potential to justify it. To get into that, I might ask, "Can you tell me about your last print project?" And as the prospect describes it, I'm mentally calculating its dollar value. I may repeat that process to talk about a few more recent projects, and maybe some future projects.

I hope you'll see how this process can help you to qualify — without destroying the mood! Because now we're getting to the point where you ask the ultimate question. And get an open and honest answer. And have some real basis to decide whether success is likely, and exactly how to position yourself as the solution to his or her problem and/or the relief for his or her pain.

Now that's selling!.