

Going With The Flow

I wrote about Yogi Berra a few months ago. Today I want to write about yoga. What does *that* have to do with printing sales? First, a little background. In another recent column, I wrote that I grew up in a competitive, athletic culture. I think it is fair to say that I grew old in that same culture. I played basketball into my 60th year, but I eventually had to give it up, for fear of injury. My balance was simply not good enough to play a contact sport anymore.

So, I thought, yoga is supposed to be good for balance. I will give that a try.

Practice Makes Perfect

I have found several applications to selling in my yoga practice. The first is connected to that word “practice.” One of the key concepts of yoga is that you never attain perfection, but you continue to practice in search of improvement. I think most printing salespeople would benefit from a “practice” mentality. I know too many who do the same things, days after day, with little if any attempt to learn from either successes or failures.

I would challenge you to ask yourself two questions at the end of each day: (1) What did I learn about printing today? (2) What did I learn about selling today? And here is something else to keep in mind. There are two kinds of product knowledge which are important to a modern printing salesperson, *technical* product knowledge and *applications* product knowledge. *Technical* knowledge is pretty straightforward, covering ink, toner, paper and other substrates, printing equipment and printing processes. *Applications* knowledge is all about how the printing is used, whether it be for marketing, branding or any other form of communication of data or information. You may be strong on the technical side, but are you as strong on the applications side?

If you practice your skills and add to your knowledge every day, you will be a better salesperson.

Balance and Flow

I have also found that there is a flow involved in both building and maintaining customer relationships. More importantly, I have found that most print buying decisions are made on the buyer’s timetable, not the seller’s. You cannot rush a buyer, at least not without taking some risk of damaging the relationship.

This is especially true in the early stages of prospecting. I have seen many salespeople employ an uncoordinated strategy, either calling or e-mailing a “suspect” every day, or calling or e-mailing at random intervals, neither of which seems to produce very good results.

The process I teach starts with an introductory e-mail, which says little more than “I am a printing salesperson. I would like to talk with you. I will call soon to ask for an appointment.” It does not attempt to tell your whole story, but it does establish your identity, your immediate goal, and your follow-up plan.

The next step is the phone call to ask for the appointment. “Hello, this is David Fellman, from ABC Printing. I wrote to you recently, and I promised that I would be calling to set an appointment. How does your schedule look for later this week?”

Do you see how this phone call flows from the introductory e-mail? Again, it does not attempt to tell your whole story. The goal is to “close the sale” proposed in that e-mail, a commitment to meet and talk further.

The result of this phone call might be the appointment you are hoping for. It might also be a firm and final rejection. Most likely, though, it will be inconclusive — something ranging from “try me again in a couple of weeks” to “leave a message at the beep.”

Those are common situations, right? So why not plan your response in advance, so you can flow right into it. My voice mail strategy is consistent and straightforward. The first time I find myself talking to someone’s voice mail, I simply identify myself, restate the promise that I made in my earlier e-mail, and ask the buyer to call me back to set an appointment.

Which they rarely do. But that is OK, because I have a plan for that too. I give the buyer two days, and then I call again. This time, if I find myself talking to voice mail again, I raise the ante. My thought process is this, I *asked* this buyer to return my call and he or she did not, so this time, I need to provide a reason why calling me back is a good idea.

Sure, you could do that on your first voice mail message. For that matter, you could do it in your introductory e-mail. The whole point, though, is to recognize the value of a strategy that does not require you to shoot off all of your big sales and marketing guns at once. To me, it makes much better sense to flow through the process.

More on this topic next month.