Marketing Imagination

I'm in multitasking mode today, writing this, performing some routine maintenance on my computers, and watching the British Open on TV. The Open Championship (as the Brits officially call it) is one of my favorite sporting events, especially when it's played in Scotland, as it is this year, at St. Andrews. For a hacker like me, it's always refreshing to watch the real golfers have to hack their way through the Scottish wind and weather, over the hills and dales of the seaside links golf courses, and through the gorse—thick and heavy grass that makes the "rough" at a typical American country club look pretty feeble.

The announcers always stress that links golf requires more imagination than its country club counterpart. There are a lot more right-or-left or high-or-low decisions to be made.

So what does all of this have to do with printing sales? It's really pretty simple. If you want to be successful as a Marketing Services Provider, you'll need to bring some "marketing imagination" to the party, because this is a whole different game than simply selling printing!

MSP Defined

What exactly does it mean to be a Marketing Services Provider? I think that discussion has to start by asking what Marketing Services are. Obviously printing is one of them, but what else are we talking about here?

I think we can start with some ancillary-to-printing services like design and mailing, and from mailing, it's a fairly short step to mailing list sourcing and management. From there, though, I think it's a fairly large step to *database* development and management, especially the *development* component. In the early days of mailing services as a product for quick/digital/small commercial printers, I remember quite a bit of complaining about how crappy the typical customer's mailing list was. When you consider that the *data* a mailing list carries is only a matter of names and addresses, it can get downright scary to consider how much work you'll have to do to develop and maintain a real marketing database—one that will allow you and your customers to take full advantage of the advanced printing capabilities that have really spurred this transition in the first place.

Having said that, the development and maintenance of a real marketing database is a Marketing Service that some customers will pay for, and the more complex the database—and the more valuable the data!—the more you can charge for the service.

Marketing Plan

Data is not the end product, though, at least not for my vision of a Marketing Service Provider. The greatest value an MSP can provide is to put that data to use. The MSP's whole selling proposition has to be "we can help you to grow your business." The ultimate sale is the *how*—in other words, the Marketing Plan.

I teach a seminar on How To Build A Marketing Plan, and I always start it the same way—by asking attendees, "How many of you would agree that it's a really good idea to have a comprehensive, written marketing plan in place for your business?" Every hand in the room always goes up. Then I ask: "How many of you have one?" Not so many hands. And when I ask why that is, the answer generally has something to do with not knowing where to begin.

That's actually pretty simple. A marketing plan is really only the answer to three questions: (1) Where are we now? (2) Where do we want to be? (3) What will it take to get there? Most of your customers will have some sense of where they are now, and where they want to be. They'll look to a Marketing Services Provider for help in how to get there, ideally both for the plan and the execution.

Comprehensive Plan

It's important to understand that a direct mail program is not a marketing plan. At the level I'm talking about, direct mail might be one *component* of a marketing plan. It's also important to understand that this MSP thing has to take you well beyond printing. Personalized e-mail. Website design. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and whatever comes next in terms of online marketing and communications opportunities. Any or all of these could be components in a comprehensive marketing plan, which probably means that you have a lot of learning to do!

One of my clients said it very well the other day: "We're not a printing company, we're a communications company. We have to master all forms of business communication and not limit ourselves to putting ink or toner on paper."

You can compare that attitude to something else I heard recently: "We have to fight to preserve print! We can't let these other methods of communication destroy our business!"

Personally, I'm not one for swimming against a tidal wave. The printing industry has been hugely important in the development of civilization, but it cannot impose its will on the civilization it helped to develop.

Your Marketing Plan

Let's go back to "we can help you to grow your business." I think you start that discussion by asking what "grow your business" means to your prospects and customers. Are they looking for new members, new customers, new donors, or to sell more or get more from members or customers or donors they already have? What do they know about all of those suspects, prospects, members or customers? What do they *need to know* in order to bring your advanced capabilities to bear on their marketing challenges?

That's really the essence of *your* marketing plan, right, to find *applications* for the Marketing Services you can provide?

Imagination and Creativity

If I were you, I'd be excited by this opportunity. I wrote recently that the printer who "owns" the marketing plan really does "own" the customer, at least to the degree that "owning" any printer-customer relationship is possible. (What Happened To Loyalty, *QP*, July 2010) I've also written many times that you only have two ways to grow—one is to gain new customers, and the other is to sell more to the customers you already have. Marketing Services expands your product line pretty dramatically, and it has the potential to be *hugely* profitable. There's a lot less material cost involved when you're selling ideas, as opposed to ink or toner and paper.

That leads us to the ultimate success factors for Marketing Services Providers. I think this is going to be one of those 80-20 situations, with the smaller part being technical competence. The larger part will be imagination and creativity—developing marketing plans that (1) incorporate all of the things that a printer who has evolved into a Marketing Services Provider can sell, and (2), actually works to grow the customer's business. I'll write more about imagination and creativity next month.

Marketing Imagination — Part 2

In last month's column, I asked you to think about what it means to be a Marketing Services Provider. Most printers, I think, are banking on technical competence to help them to make this transition that much of the industry is talking about—in other words, being technically able to produce a PURL or VDP project. I, on the other hand, think the key to success with be marketing imagination and creativity, and I promised to write more about that this month.

Before I go any farther, though, I want to provide you with a reminder and a caution. First the reminder. VDP is an acronym for a term that is an element of industry jargon. Print sellers may know what *variable data printing* means, but the evidence indicates that most print buyers really don't get it. *Personalization* is a much better term, and I'm still pretty proud of the term I've coined—*extreme personalization!*—which has proven to be more understandable to most buyers and gives you a more interesting story to tell.

Now the caution. Stop talking about PURL programs, as in: "We just did a PURL program for one of our customers." Beyond the jargon issue, you'll be a lot more successful in this Marketing Services Provider thing if you understand that what you did was a *marketing program*, which happened to involve PURLs.

PURL Imagination

OK, so you (hopefully) know what a PURL is. In order to be an effective Marketing Services Provider, you have to know what it can do, and a PURL can do basically two things. It can lead to a place where a prospect or customer can get personalized information, or it can lead to a place where a customer or prospect can provide *personalization* information. (Please note that a Uniform Resource Locator is technically an *address*. What's important in marketing terms is the *landing page* defined by the address. In other words, it's not a PURL program, it's a marketing program utilizing PURLs to get to landing pages.

Let's say that you have a restaurateur as a customer, and he owns four restaurants, each with different menus and each in a different part of town. With nothing more than a basic mailing list—names and addresses—you could develop a marketing program using postcards and PURLs that could take people to a landing page where they'd see the menu for the restaurant closest to them.

If they (1) read the postcard, (2) enter the PURL into their browser, and (3) like what they see on the menu, they might go to the restaurant. (Please note that they might be more likely to do all of those things if there was an incentive involved. Free dessert anyone?) I think you'll agree that if enough people follow that process, Phase 1 of the marketing program would be considered a success.

Don't Lose The Picture!

But let's not stop there! Getting people into the closest restaurant provides two opportunities. First, to impress them with the food or the service or the ambiance or any combination of those, creating a desire to return. Second, to capture information to use in Phase 2—which I would see as a marketing program to get the customers of each restaurant into the others.

What information? Eventually, I'd like to know things like age, income range, favorite foods and favorites among other things, but for immediate marketing purposes, I think we only need their e-mail addresses. Why? Because with that information, we can open up an entire new channel of communication.

This is where many printers lose the picture. "I don't want them doing their marketing by e-mail," one of my clients told me. "I don't make any money on e-mail."

"Let me rephrase that," I told him. "You haven't in the past, but you can in the future. And beyond that, you can make money developing the marketing plan in the first place."

"Even if that's true," he said, "I wouldn't have the slightest idea how to charge for it."

"That's actually the easy part," I said. "You develop an hourly rate and then you estimate how many hours it's going to take."

I'll write more about pricing in the future. For today, let me just tell you that I sell my own marketing planning services exactly that way. I just finished a project that I estimated at 5-6 hours at $200 per hour, and my client bought my services on that basis. It took almost 7 hours to complete the project, so I "lost" a little profit on the deal—but I'll also know to say 6-7 hours next time I'm looking at a similar project!

Plan Imagination

Back to the restaurant marketing plan, once you have a customer's e-mail address, you can do many things—including a program using PURLs to lead people to a place where they can provide *personalization* information. What I'm talking about here is a landing page where you could ask about age, income range, favorite foods and favorites among other things. Please note, though, that I'm talking about using e-mail to get them to that page, not postcards or any other form of printed direct mail. Why? Because it's easier to get people to click a link in an e-mail than it is to get them to type a long URL into a browser. And it is, right?

But let's not get hung up on high-technology. If I were trying to sell a marketing plan to this restaurateur, I would also include a simple card device to try to capture the same information from "regular" customers (read that: people who found their way to the restaurants without being affected by Phase 1 of the marketing program). The marketing opportunity here goes beyond developing new customers. It also includes "maximizing" established customers, and I think you'll probably also like the idea that this is something else you can print!

Let's add some creativity to this part of the process. First of all, let's remember that people are more likely to do what you want them to do if there's an incentive involved. As noted, free dessert is a possibility, but how about a free coffee mug, imprinted with the restaurant's logo? Again, that's something else you could make money on, and it won't hurt you to present your customer with multiple options to choose from.

Here's one more thought for today. I have several reasons for wanting to know the age of this restaurateur's customers, and I'll get into those in Part 3 of this discussion. The thought for today is that I don't want to ask their age, I want to ask for their *birth date*. I'll explain that next month!

Ooops, still one more thought for today. I have rebuilt my website, and I invite you to check out the new davefellman.com.

Marketing Imagination — Part 3

This is the third installment in my series on what it means to be a Marketing Services Provider. If you haven't read the first two—and if you don't still have your copies of the September and October issues around—you can find the first two columns in the article archives at either www.quickprinting.com or www.davefellman.com. (Even if you have read the first two columns, I hope you'll check out my new website. A client built the first one for me almost 10 years ago, in trade for consulting services. I built this one myself. It's pretty basic, but I'm still pretty proud of myself for learning a new skill!)

Creativity and Imagination

OK, back to the scenario I've been using as an example of marketing imagination and creativity. The customer is a restaurateur who owns four restaurants, each with a different menu and each in a different part of town. So far we've discussed Phase 1, a program using postcards and PURLs to take people to a landing page where they'll see the menu for the restaurant closest to them, and the beginnings of Phase 2, which is data collection to be used in later stages. The thought I left you with last month was that I want to know their ages, so I'm going to ask them for their birth dates.

Why not just ask "How old are you?" or set up a few check boxes to indicate age range? Because birthdays provide specific promotional opportunities for restaurants! And I'm not just talking about a "free dessert on your birthday" promotion—although that might be the most appropriate marketing strategy for some restaurants. I'm really asking you to use imagination and creativity and think about what *could be* a winner for your customer or prospect.

My first career was in restaurants, and I can tell you from experience that the "birthday boy" is often not the driving force in planning a birthday dinner. What if you had two pieces of data: the birthday boy's birthday and his wife/significant other's e-mail address. On one hand, you could send the birthday boy a personalized offer involving a free something-or-other, which would certainly provide an incentive to come spend some money at your customer's restaurant. On the other hand, though, you could communicate with the wife/significant other in an entirely different way*: "Hi Jane, it's going to be John's birthday in a couple of weeks. Have you thought about a special dinner, especially considering that this one is the big 5-0 (*Note: you could know that if your data collection process asks for month, day and year.) *Please give me a call, and I'll be happy to help you with a reservation and whatever 'special attention' you'd like to arrange."*

Now, you might not take this approach with a casual family restaurant, but it *could be* a winner for an elegant and expensive operation.

Data Imagination

I hope you see that *data* is really the foundation of effective marketing. Using 20th Century terminology, data is the difference between shotgun marketing and rifle-shot marketing. I wrote in the first installment that the greatest value an MSP can provide is to put data to use, but I hope you'll recognize that you also have a role—and an opportunity!—in the strategic collection of data. In other words, you can help your customers to see potential and then to collect data to support that potential.

Let's consider some more of what age data can do for you, alone and in combination with other data, like income range, favorite meals and favorite other things. Let's say that one of your customer's four restaurants features a lounge, with live music on Friday and Saturday nights. Friday is "rock night" and Saturday is "jazz night." Do you see how age alone could be an indicator of the most likely target market? Do you see how jazz fans might be turned off by the atmosphere if they wandered in on "rock night"—maybe never to return! Do you also see how that "favorite other things" data might help you to identify the rock fans among the older clientele?

Now let's consider the "favorite meals" data. As noted, each of the four restaurants in this scenario serves a different menu, and people tend to have favorite restaurants for favorite meals or cuisine—a favorite steak house, a favorite Italian restaurant, a favorite Mexican restaurant, and so on. Your customer wants to be the "favorite restaurant" in each of his four categories, and that just may require getting people to give his other restaurants a try. So how about a series of four—or more!—postcards featuring the signature dishes of the four restaurants, and a data-driven mailing that matches them up to the people who've expressed interest in those meals, or that cuisine. "Wait till you try *our* Lasagna!"—or Prime Rib or Chow Mein or Pheasant Under Glass.

Creativity & Imagination

I have written before that most of the "personalized" direct mail I see these days is pretty primitive. I hope you'll see through these examples that there's a lot more to your variable data and image capabilities than putting the recipient's name on both sides of a postcard. I hope you'll also see that there's a lot more to being a Marketing Services Provider than putting ink or toner on paper.

I've only scratched the surface in these three columns, but I hope I've given you a few things to think about—at the very least, a vision of the kind of business you want to be running a few years from now.

I don't see you providing the full range of marketing services to Fortune 500 companies, by the way. It's probably fair to say that most of them will at least have the planning and strategy part down pretty well. I can promise you this, though, there are hundreds if not thousands of businesses and organizations in your market area who can't market their way out of a paper bag right now. Some of them will pay you well for your creativity and imagination.

The Marketing Imagination

The Marketing Imagination is the title of a book written by Theodore Levitt, a former Harvard Business School professor and editor of the Harvard Business Review. The book was published in 1983, and I read it about a year later, just after getting promoted to a marketing staff position with Moore Business Forms. I'm often asked where a printer can learn about marketing, and I think this book would be a good start. It won't tell you how to use PURLs and VDP to build your customers' businesses, but it will probably get you thinking about the marketing discipline in a different way—just as I've tried to do today!