Making The Time And Using It Wisely

I had a call from an industry supplier a few weeks ago, and my caller had an interesting question. She wanted to know what percentage of quick printers have an outside salesforce at work.

I told her that I know of no really accurate industry-wide statistics, but I'd be happy to give her my best guess. First, though, I told her that we needed to clarify the word "salesforce." If she wanted only companies that employ one or more full-time, outside salespeople, that would be a much different answer than a percentage of quick printing companies that are at least making an outside "sales effort." That term would include all of the shops where only the owner goes out on calls, or where one or more people make outside sales calls on a less-than-full-time basis.

She was willing to accept that criteria, so I gave her this opinion: I said that I'd be comfortable with the statement that 30% of all quick printers are making an effective outside sales effort; another 30% are making an ineffective effort; and the remaining 40% aren't making outside sales calls at all.

Defining Ineffective

We talked a little bit about the broad ramifications of my statement, and then my caller then asked me to expand on what I meant by the term "ineffective." I told her that most of the failings in this area probably fall into one of three categories: lack of organization, lack of persistence, and the inability to convince people to change printers.

(One of the most basic bits of understanding that any quick printer should have is that everyone—every potential customer—already has a printer. It's either you already, or else someone else is selling them what you'd like to be selling them. The decision to buy from you also often involves a decision to stop buying from that other printer because you've made yourself appear to be a better choice.)

Getting Organized

A lack of organization is probably the fundamental failing of most of those quick printers in the "ineffective" category. And there are really two issues here: making the time to sell, and focusing your selling efforts on the customers and prospects who are most likely to provide what you want for your company.

I've run up against both of these problems recently with a couple of individual quick printers who are members of one of my consulting groups. (I work with two groups of quick printers who come to Cary, NC twice each year for programs dedicated to sales, marketing, and management issues. During the rest of the year, I consult with these printers via telephone, fax and mail. If you're interested in learning more about this particular "product" of mine, please give me a call at 919-363-4068.)

The strategies I've suggested to these individual printers might have some merit for you too. With the printer who's been having a problem finding the time to sell, we took a look at the factors that are "competing" with his selling time. As with many of you, I suspect, he starts out most days with every intention of getting out to make sales calls, but rarely does an early morning go by without his employees bringing him crises to deal with and problems to solve. Often, the next thing he knows, the time he'd set aside for selling is gone.

A large part of our discussion centered on whether most of the problems could be solved by the employees themselves, and whether many of the crises could wait until later in the day for him to get involved. His answer to both of those questions was "almost certainly yes." So what I suggested is that he establish that he is simply not available to his staff until 1:00 PM each day. Even if he's in the shop, he is not to be interrupted unless the matter is of extreme importance.

In addition to the obvious benefits of creating selling time, and time for other management activities, what we hope to create with this new policy is "empowerment with a parachute." The employees in this shop are being urged to make decisions on routine matters. They are a good group of people, and they should be able to grow quickly into their new authority and responsibility. If they run into something that they aren't confident enough to handle, they know—and can tell a customer—exactly when they'll be able to get the owner involved and resolve the issue.

A Disciplined Effort

My other "consultee" has made a lot of progress in the last year in increasing the time spent in his selling efforts. But he's had some concerns about whether he is spending all of that time wisely. Most recently, he's been finding himself spending most of his selling time with active customers. He knows that this kind of "maintenance selling" is important in keeping his current customers active and happy, but he also knows that spending most of his time with his already active customers is not the key to the kind of growth he wants.

In this case, my suggestion was to break his "contact list" down into three groups: active customers who require maintenance, occasional customers who he knows have more business that he could be handling, and raw prospects

who have not yet given him any business, but have shown through a response to one of his mailings that they have some interest in talking with him.

It has been his policy for most of the last year to focus on sales activities on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. Those sales activities have included a combination of telephone work and actual outside sales calls. So what I suggested is this: on Mondays, he works on active customers; on Wednesdays, he works on developing his list of occasional and undersold customers; and on Thursdays, he works on his raw prospects.

The discipline in this program seems to be helping him to spread his efforts across both of his areas of opportunity and need...to sell more to his current customers and to develop some new ones.

Make The Time

I've had many, many quick printers tell me that the biggest problem they face in selling is simply finding the time to make sales calls. My initial advice is always the same: take that word "find" and lose it, and replace it with the work "make"—and with the understanding that the selling is almost certainly at least as important as anything else you do in running your business.

I've run into very few quick printers who are totally immune to the temptation to let themselves get "sucked back into the shop" at the slightest opportunity. And let's face it...your own shop can be a much more comfortable place to be than out in the selling world where people have a disturbing tendency to say "no" to you. Still, in order to be effective at selling, you have to be able to resist the temptation.

By the way, this is not a temptation/selling problem that is limited to printshop owners. There are plenty of supposedly full-time outside salespeople who let themselves get "sucked back into the shop" at every opportunity. That's certainly another contributing factor to the percentage of "ineffective" sales efforts.

As a sales manager, you don't solve that selling program by simply pushing your salespeople out the door. As noted earlier, it's critical to focus a salesperson's efforts on the customers and prospects who are most likely to provide what you want for your company. More on that next month.

Telemarketing Note

Here's something I forgot to mention to you in my last two articles on telemarketing and telephone contact management. If you're going to spend a lot of time on the phone, you'll find a headset to be a tremendous asset, both to your comfort and to your productivity.

I resisted buying a headset for a long time because of two factors. One was the cost; it seemed like buying a headset would require a minimum investment of a few hundred dollars. The second was that every model I looked at also required you to physically raise the receiver of a standard telephone before you could listen and talk on the headset.

Then, about four months ago, I was walking down the telephone aisle in my local office supply superstore. (See, they are good for something!) A little plastic box with a telephone keypad caught my eye. On further examination, I realized that the little box was actually the guts of a self-contained telephone set with a headset attached.

It was made by Plantronics, a well-respected name in the aviation headset business. It's their model SP04, and it was on sale that day for $79.95.

I bought one, along with a basic, inexpensive line-splitter jack. The line-splitter goes into my wall jack, and I run both a standard desk phone and my headset phone onto my desk from it. If I'm making or answering "intermittent" calls, I use the desk phone, but when I'm involved in heavy telephone work, I use the headset. With the headset on, I push a single button to get a dial tone for an outgoing call or to answer an incoming call. I never have to touch the standard desk phone, as you do with most headset models. Both hands are then free to write, or enter notes into my computer.

I don't think I've ever spent so (relatively) little money on anything else that has improved my productivity like this headset. Now, if only it were cordless...