

## Selling Situations: How Do You Handle...?

One of the quick printing salespeople I work with as sort of a surrogate sales manager called in last week with a list of questions. They all represent selling situations he's found himself in recently, and his ultimate question in each case was: "How should I handle a situation like this?"

Because the situations are all pretty common—at least from my experience—I thought it might be helpful to other quick printing salespeople and sales managers to "listen in" on my responses.

### Following Up On "Occasional" Prospects

The first question on the salesperson's list was: *How often should I follow up on prospects who might be occasional customers, ordering maybe once a quarter or at best twice a year?*

The most important consideration in situations like this is to make sure that the time you spend is proportional to the value you're likely to gain. A small or occasional customer can still be a good customer, but not if they take up more of a salesperson's time and other resources than they're worth. Part of the key to making good decisions with occasional prospects is to factor in the likely size of those occasional orders.

Obviously, a prospect who might give you two or three \$1500 orders each year is worth expending some of a salesperson's resources on. The prospect who might place two or three \$80 orders is not. That prospect should be on your mailing list, but not on your contact list. Direct mail—or some other form of advertising—is really the only cost-effective means of marketing to low-volume, occasional prospects.

As for how often to follow up with a worthwhile occasional prospect, my best advice is to ask the prospect how best to stay in contact without turning into a pain in the butt! I have found that most prospects who have any real interest in doing business with you will try to give you an honest answer. Then you simply do what they tell you to do. With anyone else, the answer doesn't matter because you're not going to do business there anyway!

How do you tell the difference? Instinct is part of it, but you should also be alert for subtle—and sometimes not so subtle—clues which many prospects will provide. For example, the prospect who tells you that he only orders printing 2-3 times a year—but then tells you to check in every month—is sending an inconsistent message. Inconsistency usually translates into lack of real interest. I would feel a lot better about my chances with a prospect who said: "I don't expect to be ordering anything before August, but it would probably be a good idea for you to check with me in July."

If the order is worth pursuing, it's worth at least a couple of phone calls and at least one face-to-face meeting. The "cost" of those activities is what you have to consider in determining your minimum "pursuit standards." And remember, once you win the first order, you can also start to factor in the longer-term value of an occasional customer, including the possibility that their needs will grow.

One final thought on this question...for all intents and purposes, there are two types of prospect follow up: spoken and written. Spoken follow up—which could mean phone calls or personal visits—has a lot of "pain in the butt" potential. That's especially true of "Do you have anything for me to quote on today" phone calls. If you feel the need to "keep yourself in front of" any prospect, it's a lot safer to do that with written communication—letters or even handwritten notes—which are much less intrusive.

### Short Term Thinking

The salesperson's second question concerned a prospect we had called on together on my last field visit. Our meeting was with an assistant to the president of this company, who was working on a fairly significant mailing program, but going about it in a very strange way. She was planning to run 14,000 sets of three pages—none of them personalized—along with 14,000 envelopes *through her laser printer!* And she wasn't even addressing the envelopes with her laser printer, just printing the return address, and later putting mailing labels on!

My salesperson realized that he had encountered a "hero" opportunity when he heard this, and he followed up by preparing a proposal that clearly outlined the time and cost savings her company would gain by having the pages and envelopes offset printed, and the pages collated, and folded. He even went so far as to find out what kind of laser printer she was using, and he included the actual cost of toner cartridges for that machine in his proposal.

The cost savings were substantial, and the salesperson was amazed when the young woman told him that she'd still prefer to complete this project on the laser printer. "Is there any way to deal with this kind of mindset?" he asked me.

I asked him if he thought there would be other business from this company down the line. He answered that this seemed to be their only significant project. Next, I asked him if he felt the young woman did a good job of

presenting his proposal to her boss. He answered that she couldn't have, because the cost savings were so substantial that her boss would have to be a real idiot to ignore them. "I wouldn't be surprised," he said, "to find out that she never even showed him our proposal."

"Well, then," I said, "It sounds to me like you'd have nothing to lose by writing directly to the president of the company with your proposal." My advice was to word his cover letter carefully, trying not to appear overtly critical of the assistant. I suggested saying something to the effect that "I may not have done a very good job of communicating the benefits of my suggestions to your assistant...possibly preventing her from communicating them to you. The costs savings are so substantial, though, that I felt it would be appropriate to write directly to you."

There is always a risk when you attempt to "go around" your primary contact. He or she may shut you out completely as a result. That in itself is a strong reason to seek the ultimate decision-maker right from the start.

The decision-maker himself may be offended by your 'bold' behavior, and refuse to talk to you anyway. But realistically, where is the risk when you're not getting anywhere with your contact? If that's the case, you really have nothing to lose. Try once to get beyond the roadblock, and if that doesn't work, spend your time and efforts on other prospects

### **An Impossible Price**

Here's another too-familiar situation: "I gave this woman a quote," the salesperson said. "It was a 2/2 job, a quantity of 500 with 2 halftones on 8½" x 11" coated stock. Our quote was \$250.00, and she told me that her current printer would do it for \$40.00. That's less than the cost of the paper! All I could think of is that she's buying from someone working out of his garage, or else she's lying to me. *How do you handle it when you know a person can't be telling you the truth?*"

I answered that I saw two possibilities in her response, the first of which is that she was in fact lying. "If that's that case," I said, "why would you even consider wanting her as a customer? Remember, we're not just looking for customers, we're looking for good customers."

The second possibility is that she really does have a printer who will sell to her at those prices. And if she does, more power to her. Is she getting the best possible quality? Maybe not. (Although maybe so. I hear a lot of quick printers speaking with scorn about "garage printer" quality, but my experience is that the guy who works out of his basement or garage is more often a bad businessman than a bad craftsman. Besides, quality is extremely relative—to the beholder and to the job—and who's to say that a lower level of quality is not a greater value to a particular customer or on a particular job.

"The bottom line here," I said, "is that you just laugh about something like this. Truth or lie, with that much of a price difference, there's no way you're in contention for the business, so don't let it upset you."

"Besides," I added, "you'll have enough opportunities to get upset when your price is \$250.00 and your competitor's price is \$249.00 and you still don't get the order. That's when you should be upset!"

"But not at the prospect," I added. "You should really only be upset with yourself if you can't sell yourself for \$1.00 more than any competitor!" That, to me, is a large part of the definition of a professional salesperson...the willingness to accept responsibility for anything less than the desired level of success.

### **Bid Situations**

The last question on my salesperson's list concerned bid situations. "What should I do when I come upon a prospect who goes out for bids on every print job?" he asked. "It seems like that provides a limited opportunity to build a solid customer relationship and become the printer of choice."

The first consideration in a situation like this takes us back to the first question we discussed today. Is this a company with a regular flow of printing work, or would they be an occasional customer at best? If the company buys a substantial amount of printing, I would be inclined to offer quotes on at least a few projects and see where their pricing tolerances lie.

A bid process doesn't always mean that a prospect or customer buys solely on the basis of price, but even that is not the most important issue here. Even with the absolute price-buyer, you can't know whether his/her idea of low enough prices and your idea of high enough prices are consistent until you put your prices on the table. The key is to bid at your normal price. Then if you get the job, it's a good job, and you can concentrate on performance. You may never get all of this prospect's business, but the combination of pricing within both parties' tolerances and performance which meets or exceeds the buyer's expectations can be the basis of a very solid customer relationship.

If you don't get the job, follow up and find out why. Was the job awarded to the lowest bidder? And if so, how far off was your bid? If you were close at your normal profit margins, you might consider a little bit more aggressive bid on the next opportunity in an attempt to gain some of this prospect's business. If you weren't close, though—or if

more aggressive pricing still doesn't win one of the next two or three bids—you should simply cross this prospect off your contact list.

"The bid process in itself is not the problem," I told the salesperson. "You just have to keep yourself from getting caught up in a losing game. Bidding and losing consistently is a complete waste of time. So is bidding and winning at prohibitively low margins. But bidding and getting a reasonable share of the business at solid profit margins is a completely different story."

### **Common Situations**

None of the selling situations my surrogate salesperson ran into are unique. Not only will other quick printing salespeople come up against them, *he* will run into variations of the same themes again and again.

I've told him that one of his most important challenges right now is to learn something from each selling situation he encounters. "The good news," I said, "is that, a few years from now, some of the situations that throw you for a loop today will be 'no brainers' for you to handle...at least to the degree that you'll know what to say and what to do to give yourself the best shot at gaining a positive result. The bad news—if you want to think of it that way—is that you won't always get that positive result. You won't always get the order."

For what it's worth, I never looked at that as bad news myself...only as one of the realities of selling. You don't have to sell to everyone—or get every order you bid—to be successful in printing sales. You do have to put yourself into enough selling situations that getting a reasonable share of the victories adds up to the overall results you need.