

Stay Positive!

There are plenty of reasons to hate your competitors. It's bad enough that they seem to have some kind of hold over your prospects which keeps you from getting your foot in those doors. Beyond that, some have the gall to approach your own customers, often with ridiculously low prices that threaten your established relationships. It can be tempting to tell both your customers and your prospects what incredible jerks those other printers are.

But, please, don't do that! There's almost nothing that makes a salesperson look worse than bad-mouthing the competition. The definition of "professional" may be somewhat elusive in selling, but I'm pretty sure it includes being positive in everything you do.

So here's a better approach. *They're good, but we're at least as good, and maybe even better!* If you establish that position, you can compete on a positive basis.

Good vs. Better

The good vs. better strategy has several applications in printing sales, starting with the prospecting situation in which a "gatekeeper" says that "we're happy with our current supplier." The common response to that obstacle seems to take one of two forms: (1) "That's great. I'm glad that you're happy and I appreciate loyalty. Please think of me as a backup in case there's ever anything they can't do for you" or (2), "What exactly do you like about them?" I don't particularly like either of those strategies, and here's why. The first is too soft and the second is mis-directed.

Think about this. Anyone who buys enough printing to get really excited about already has a backup supplier, or at least someone beyond the primary supplier that he/she has been talking to. Asking to be considered as a backup may only put you at the bottom of what might be a pretty tall ladder. And asking the gatekeeper what he/she likes about a supplier is pointless, because the gatekeeper is not the one making the buying decisions!

Many salespeople seem to interpret this as a "go away!" situation. I look at it differently. What I hear is: "You seem like a nice enough person, so let me do you a favor. *I think* we're really happy with our current supplier. You can probably make a better investment of your time somewhere else."

Here's the thing, I don't want a gatekeeper making that decision. I want to convince him/her to give me the name of the decision-maker, so I can see for myself. So my strategy is to ask who that supplier is, and then say: "Oh, yeah, they're very good. In fact, they're probably the second best printer in this entire area!"

The normal response is a laugh or at least a smile, which tells me that they get the joke. Then I will say: "Seriously, they're a very good company, but do you think your company should ignore the possibility that we're even better?"

More often than not, the gatekeeper will give me the name of the decision-maker. That's no guarantee of eventual success, but at least I'm able to take the next step and ask the decision-maker to meet with me.

Second Stage Obstacle

It's a little different story when you hear "I'm happy with my current supplier" from the decision-maker, but I have still had quite a bit of success with my "second best" strategy when facing a second stage obstacle. And remember, you're not trying to sell printing at this point, you're only trying to sell the idea that the buyer should meet with you.

For harder cases, I've developed a strategy which I call the "how happy" approach. In this one, I ask my prospect to rate the current supplier on a scale from 1-20, in terms of 5 criteria: quality, service, price, general ease of doing business and innovation/bringing new ideas. I have built this process into a letter, and you can find it on the downloads page at my website: www.davefellman.com. As you'll see, the punch line of this strategy is delivered after the prospect completes his/her "how happy" evaluation and compares the total of the 1-20 ratings to the maximum score of 100.

"If an honest evaluation delivers a score of 90 points or less," the letter says, "don't you owe it to yourself and your company to take a more in-depth look at (my company)?" Believe me, it can be quite eye-opening to show people that their current supplier really earns something less than an "A" grade overall.

Discovery Process

When you do get to speak with the decision-maker, please don't use that time to make a canned presentation. You'll be much better off with a discovery process, asking questions to determine exactly what your prospect wants

and needs — looking especially for wants or needs that are not being fully met by the current supplier. My favorite question is this one: “Is there anything, no matter how small, that you would change if you could?”

Let’s say that you discover some minor service issues; for example: “It would be nice if I could count on hearing back from my salesperson within an hour when I leave him a message.” You certainly wouldn’t want to say: “I can’t believe that jerk makes you wait that long!” But how about this: “I can’t promise that either, at least not 100% of the time. But here’s what I can do. I’ll give you my cell number and also my CSR’s direct line. One of us should be able to get back to you within an hour, and I’ll make sure she knows that you’re a very high priority. I’ll tell her that we’re trying to win your business by outperforming someone who’s *pretty* good, so we have to be *very* good!”

Please understand that the key here is to find some level of dissatisfaction, and then put forth a positive plan to change it. If the choice is between “good” and “better,” I think most people would prefer “better.” Now, granted, price may play a role in all of this. Some people will choose “good” at a lower price over “better” at a premium price, but “better” is really the only platform you have for selling at a premium price.

An Epiphany

It’s worth noting that my “favorite question” reflects a change from my training. All the way back in my first selling job, I was taught to ask (2) above, “What exactly do you like about them?” I had an epiphany one day, though, when I realized that I was just giving my prospects an opportunity to brag about their current supplier.

Yes, there’s value in knowing what they like in another supplier, but that only positions you to say: “Well, I can do that too.” I’d rather learn what they *don’t like*, so I can say: “*I think I can do that better!*”