

Legacy and Reputation — Your Printing Headstone

I ate dinner with Michael O'Loughlin, a retired Australian Rules Football star, when I was in Australia in May. We were speaking at the same event, and were seated at the same table after he gave the pre-dinner speech. We talked mostly about basketball, but I had a chance to ask him about an expression he used during his presentation. He was talking about young players coming into the AFL, and he said "you have to commit and re-commit to what you want to leave on your footy headstone."

"If I used the word 'legacy,'" I asked him, "would we be talking about the same thing?"

He answered that we would, that he was stressing the importance of building a good reputation, both on the field and off. That got me thinking about how "legacy" and "reputation" apply to printing salespeople, because just like with footballers, your reputation precedes you *and* follows you *and* affects whether people will want to work with you—as customers *or* co-workers *or* employers. And while you may not be thinking so far into the future right now, you are building your legacy.

A Good Teammate

I would like my own business headstone to say this: "He worked hard for his customers, and for his company. He was a good teammate." I think Michael would approve, especially the last part. And I think he'd understand that the best printing salespeople are members of many teams, starting with the team at their own workplace, and extending to making themselves part of their customers' teams.

Make no mistake, though, you can't be an effective member of a customer's team unless your foremost commitment is to your company team. And that's an area where, sadly, many printing salespeople fall short. You probably know the saying that there's no "I" in "team." In my experience, most salespeople operate with too much "I" and not enough "we."

I wrote about stressing the "we" as part of your value proposition, back in the May issue (which you can find at www.i-grafix.com. Search on "Fellman" to bring up links to past issues and articles.) What I'm talking about today is a little different, because it's not about selling the team, it's about building and/or strengthening the team. Maybe the best way to explain this is with a sports analogy. If you play a team sport, your teammates need you to play your position to the best of your ability, in every minute of every game or match. Beyond that, they have every right to expect you to continually work at improving your skills. When those things don't happen, teams lose more often than they win. And everyone generally knows who's helping the team, or hurting it.

Here's a question to consider. Who do you want as a teammate, someone with modest skills who works hard at getting better, or someone with superior skills, who skates along, doing a minimum of work, not really caring how his or her performance might affect the rest of the team. Here's another question, which of those is a better description of you?

Advocacy and Honesty

As a printing salesperson, it is sometimes your job is to be the advocate of the customer to the company. At other times, it's the other way around. I'm sure you've been in the situation where you've had to fight to get a customer's order delivered on time. That's advocating for the customer. I'm also pretty sure you've been in the situation where you had to explain to a customer why their order was going to be late. That, of course, is advocating for the company. This, more than anyplace else, is where reputations get made in printing sales, and the key issue is *honesty*.

Have you ever lied to your company by overstating the customer's needs? In my experience, it's pretty common for a salesperson to fudge a delivery date by a couple of days, justifying that as "looking out for my customer." But what if the company had to turn down another opportunity because of this misrepresentation? What if another salesperson lost out on a commission because of it?

Have you ever lied to a customer about why a delivery was late, or not told them it was going to be late until it was too late to do anything about it? We have a saying in America that it's not the crime that will kill you, it's the cover-up. I think the reputation you want is for absolute honesty—with customers and with your company. Ultimately, that's what makes you the kind of salesperson people want to work with, and again, that's as customers, co-workers and employers.

So what would they put on your headstone if your printing sales career ended today? What would your legacy be? If you're not happy with the reality of the answers to those questions, I hope you'll start working at changing your reputation—and right now would be a good time!