

Win-Win, Lose-Lose

In his classic book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey expressed Habit 4: Think Win-Win. “Win-Win is not about being nice,” he wrote, “nor is it a quick-fix technique. It is a character-based code for human interaction and collaboration.”

I’m a strong believer in this concept, especially when it comes to selling, and most especially when it comes to any selling that can be characterized as the pursuit and maintenance of repeat customers. That’s what printing sales is about, wouldn’t you agree?

But what if one of your repeat customers starts thinking about buying from one of your competitors, because they’re offering lower prices? That has potential to be a win-lose scenario — your customer wins by reducing printing cost and you lose a customer. It also has potential to be a lose-lose scenario, though, and that, I think, is your best defense if you find yourself in this sort of situation.

Selling Strategy

There seem to be two fundamental selling strategies in the printing marketplace. Some companies sell on the high side of the “competitive” pricing range and others sell on the low side. High side prices are generally justified by some combination of quality, service and relationship which is perceived as *value* by the buyer. Low side pricing is often connected to a common and destructive attitude. Many printers seem to feel that *value* is more about charging less than giving more. That’s bad for the whole industry, but that’s not the specific issue I’m writing about today.

The Conversation

Here’s the conversation I recommend — and *conversation* is the key word. Your position should not be antagonistic or defensive. This needs to be a calm and rational “let me tell you what I think” situation.

“I understand that the possibility of reducing your printing cost has some appeal to you,” you might say. “And as I think about it, there might be some things we can do to help you to accomplish that goal. We can certainly take a look at everything you print, and hopefully we can find some efficiencies that would reduce your cost without taking any risks. Because that’s what concerns me when I hear about another printer offering you what I think we might call ‘lowball’ pricing. Do you agree with that term, by the way? Would it be wrong to think that they’re trying to win your business with low prices?”

“I think if you look at our industry, we’re all the same in many ways. We buy the same ink and paper and we operate similar equipment, although I think the quality of the people operating the equipment is often different. I also think some of us operate on the premise that *value* is more about lowering the price than anything else. Those printers are always trying to figure out how to quote you the lowest price, but that’s not what we’re all about. We want to quote you the lowest *possible* price, which we define as the lowest at which you can be sure you’re going to get the quality, service and reliability you need. I just worry that the other approach might involve cutting corners. I want to charge you just enough to ensure that no corners have to be cut in order to make a fair profit. You’re happy, we’re happy, it’s a win-win scenario.”

“Now, obviously, I don’t want to lose your business, but what really concerns me is that we could end up with a lose-lose-scenario. If you go with these low prices and they let you down, you lose and we lose too!”

“So let’s see if there are ways to lower your cost without increasing the risk — *our shared risk!* What do you think?”

Please note, by the way, that the last question is as important as anything else in this conversation. *This is what I think* should always be followed by *what do you think!*