

## Defensive Sales Management

One of the maxims of the sports world is that championships in the major team sports are won with defense. The offensive part of the game may be a little more glamorous, but it will always be true that you're likely to win if you can keep the other team from scoring.

In the business of selling printing, offense relates to gaining new customers. Every time you make that first sale and turn a prospect into a customer, you've accomplished the printing equivalent of a try or a goal.

But scoring isn't everything. In order to win in the long run, you also have to keep the other team from scoring more than you do. In other words, you have to gain customers *and keep them* in order to win in the printing game. *Defense!*

### Customer Service

The most obvious element of defense for a printing company is the activity that's usually called *customer service*. In theory, if you provide satisfactory levels of customer service, your customers will stay with you. That theory sometimes breaks down, though, over a conflicting definition of that word *satisfactory*.

The printers who seem to do the best job of keeping their customers are the ones who understand that there can be no fixed definition of customer service. It changes from customer to customer. And one of the most common reasons for a printer to lose a long-time customer is that the customer's service needs changed while the printer didn't.

How do you defend against that? By making sure that at least someone is focused on the customer's *business* instead of just the customer's printing.

### Executive Involvement

When I say to keep *someone* focused on the customer's overall business needs, I don't necessarily mean that it has to be the salesperson. In many ways, I'd rather see someone much more senior in your organization take on that responsibility. When a manager—or especially the owner—goes out occasionally to meet with customers on the issue of basic business needs, I think it says something much stronger in terms of the printer's commitment to the customer.

I've been out on hundreds of calls that were arranged with a phone conversation that went something like this. "The way we're set up," I'd say, "your salesperson and/or customer service rep are responsible for handling the details on your individual projects. I'd like to come out and spend a few minutes with you to be sure that our entire company is meeting your overall needs, and to see if we can come up with some new ways to make us even more valuable to you."

That can work even for the small shop, where the owner is also the salesperson. Just tell your customer that you'd like to come out with a different "hat" on every once in a while and talk about these larger business issues.

### Self-Defense

This type of executive involvement is also part of the solution to a potential problem—a salesperson leaving and taking customers away to another printer. The best way to defend against that is to minimize the importance of any single individual in the customer relationship; by broadening the level of contact between the customer and your organization.

The more people who are known to the customer, the safer the relationship is, and this kind of strategy allows you to put a very strong contingency plan into effect. If a salesperson *does* leave you for another printer, you are positioned to take a familiar team of people right out to those customers and say, "Yes, Jack is a great guy, and we're sorry he's leaving us. But we want you to remember that there are quite a few people besides Jack who have been taking care of your printing needs. And the rest of us want to keep your business!"

### Bottom Line

The bottom line is that you need to be continually working at gaining new customers—and at keeping the ones you've already got. The losers in this business don't understand that keeping customers means that you can never let up on the kind of service, attention, and understanding of their business needs that it took to gain their confidence in the first place. The winners in this business—the champions!—play great defense.