Thinking Big

I read recently that a new record has been set for the world's largest printing order. The Equitable Life Assurance Company needed 2.5 million copies of a 349 page document describing a stock offering of some sort. The sheer physical size of the print job was reflected in the statement that, if all of the finished documents were placed on top of one another, the resulting stack of paper would be 104,166 feet tall.

That's nearly 20 miles high, and more than three times taller than Mount Everest at 29,028 feet! Interestingly, it only beats the old record by about 250 feet. That was the AT&T divestiture document printed in 1983, a total of 3.2 million copies of 272 pages, which measured out at 103,915 feet. Both of those projects were printed by R.R. Donnelly, the nation's largest printing company

There was no information about the selling price of either job. I remember reading a few years back that the 1990 Census form package was the largest print job in history in that regard. That job, which was produced by Moore Business Forms (the nation's second largest printing company), was reported at $18 million.

The biggest job I was ever involved in was a total of 18.7 million 17" long continuous forms, the equivalent of 37,400,000 8 1/2" x 11" sheets. That job came in at about $225,000 if I remember right, and ran continuously on two presses, three shifts, for more than four days. Still a long way from the world's record, though, isn't it?

Thinking Big

That story actually has some bearing on my "real" topic for this month. I'm asked a lot where a small printer should look to hire salespeople. In specific, I'm asked if it's a better idea to hire a person with printing sales experience, or to "grow your own."

There are points in favor of hiring an experienced salesperson, and points against. The most obvious positives, of course, are the training factors, and the likelihood that a salesperson with experience in your market almost certainly has some customers too. When you "buy" the salesperson with an offer of compensation, you probably have some expectation that you're "buying" a certain amount of business too.

The most directly connected negatives are that experience can also mean "bad habits," and that you're never 100% guaranteed that a salesperson with existing accounts can actually bring the business along. You should never forget that the other printer has something to say about that, and I'm not just talking about a non-compete agreement that the salesperson may have signed. I'm talking about the fact—and I consider it a proven fact—that a printer who does the right thing in this situation should be able to keep the customers even if a salesperson leaves. (I'll write about *the right thing* in next month's column.)

The point I want to get at today concerns one of the specific "bad habits" possibilities for trouble when hiring an experienced salesperson. That's the possibility that the category of work this person has been selling is not the kind of work your shop is equipped to produce.

I've seen some terrible mistakes made when quick or small-press printers have hired salespeople whose experience has been in the bigger-press world. Because there's a natural tendency for salespeople to "think big" and chase the bigger orders. That's hard enough to control when it's only the high end of the right range for a particular printer. It can be even more difficult when you put a person who's used to chasing after $10,000 orders into a situation where what you really want—and need—is *a lot* of $200 jobs.

I'm not saying that a big-press salesperson can't make the transition to a situation where smaller jobs are the norm. The transition has to be *managed*, though, by you as the owner or sales manager. In truth, it's important to keep any salesperson focused on the right kind of customers and the right kind of work.

You start that with a thorough hiring and orientation process, and continue it with ongoing sales management, and a compensation plan that rewards the salesperson for bringing in lots of smaller orders rather than the occasional big one. That's the biggest thing you want to guard against, the attitude that "everything will be all right if I get one or two big orders every month or so". That kind of "big-ticket mentality" can cause a salesperson to fail, and it can sink a small printing company pretty quickly if it ever becomes the owner's attitude.

Training Time

Something else I read recently was a comparison of the length of the primary sales training period in selected industries. An article in *Sales & Marketing Management* listed a Dartnell Corporation survey as it's source, and included 22 major industries, including printing/publishing. The average of all 22 industries was 4 months, and the printing/publishing industry came in on the heavy training side with an average training period of 5.5 months.

Now that leads me to ask if *you* have a defined training period for a new sales hire. If you don't, I think it's a concept worth looking at. In fact, I would encourage you to designate the first six months of any new sales hire's employment as a training period.

What makes the training period different than "regular" employment status? The most important component is a *focus* on providing whatever skills and knowledge that this person is going to need in order to be successful. You might require that a certain number of hours must be spent each week on training of some sort, ranging from working in the bindery for a few hours early on in the process, to maybe talking an evening course on graphic design, or on speaking or writing skills a little farther along.

There are all sorts of variables in putting a training period or an overall training program together, but the basic attitude of all parties should be this: we're going to designate this six-month period to determining exactly what the new salesperson needs to learn in order to be successful, and we're going to *get it done* in six months. Then both the salesperson and the printing company will be in position to reap the rewards.