

Selling Printing Requires the Right Sales Process

By Joe Rickard

If we only knew the one right sales method for selling printing, think how easy it would be. All we have to do is just follow the steps, apply sales skills along with printing knowledge and magically, sales would appear. Everyone would make money and printing businesses would flourish.

Unfortunately, it is not that simple. There is no one single sales process that effectively fits all customer situations. We find that the common problem faced by most salespeople is not that they don't follow the correct sales process but that they are applying sales processes in a way that is not consistent to the way a printing customer buys. This explains why experienced and successful sales people can fail in a new company or why salespeople with excellent relationship skills have difficulty selling new and complex products to new customers. To avoid this, it is imperative for sales professionals and printing companies to know and have established sales processes that correlate to the way their customers buy printing.

What is a printing sales process and why do I need it? Before we discuss the best sales process, let's first define the term "process." Process is defined as a systematic series of actions directed to some end. Consequently, a "sales process" is those logical steps required to gain a sale. For instance in printing, most sales processes would begin with planning, targeting, lead generation, and qualifying accounts. For some printers, the process begins with a phone or walk-in lead. After a customer is identified as a good target, follow-on steps can include: needs analysis, proofs provided, presentations and proposals.

Knowing the right sales process for your products, markets and customers is an important question, not only for salespeople, but for owners, general managers and sales managers of printing companies.

The right sales process helps managers understand all the steps that a sales person goes through to get a sale. This can be a big help in planning and managing a printing business. For instance, they can determine who they should hire as a salesperson, how long should it take to make a sale, what should be included into the Sales Force Automation (SFA) software to track and forecast orders, what compensation plans are needed, what sales tools and resources are necessary and what products and services may need to be added.

The Four Basic Sales Processes

Having the right sales process, one that is linked to a customer's business, is as important to a sales person's success as basic sales skills and product knowledge.

We see four basic sales processes that printing company sales people deploy to sell printing. Contrary to common thinking, each has its place. Using the right sales approach will depend on the type of customer and the products that you are selling to them. Top sales people use all or combinations, of the four approaches listed below:

- Relationship Selling
- Transaction Selling
- Contract Selling
- New & Emerging Product Selling

Relationship Selling

What it is: The most common sales process in the printing industry is relationship selling. It is here where salespeople have a deep knowledge of their accounts, gain repeat business and have developed a strong and long-term association with their key customer contacts.

When to use it: This process is often deployed when the printing company's products, services and capabilities are relatively well known by the customer. Quite often the printing products are services are complex and are tailored or customized to the customer's business requirements. There are established and knowledgeable buyers that look for reliable and capable salespeople.

Why it works: With this sales process, we are reminded that regardless of the product, service or sales process, printing is a servicing business. This may also explain that with high relationship customers, salespeople and printing companies have relatively few accounts that generate most of their business. It takes great effort and time to create the performance necessary to retain large customers.

Relationship selling can also generate new business. A key step is to go to who you know. These are folks who you know have confidence in you and who can lead you to other key decision makers in your accounts. Using known references is a powerful sales tool to gain appointments and to build instant credibility. But most important is building a strong and lasting business relationship with your key decision makers.

Transaction Selling

What it is: Transaction selling is also a common process and the most competitive in the printing industry. Here the salesperson sells mostly undifferentiated and predetermined printing products and solutions. The products tend to be low tech and price sensitive products such as business cards, static printing, basic newsletters, and brochures.

Salespeople who are successful using this process must have good prospecting and closing skills as well as high call rates.

When to use it: If you have the right technology, the right price and the right set of services, the sales process is relatively short and payoff can be big. Customers who use established and well known printing products and services are good candidates for this approach.

Why it works: The value for the transactional customer is price, turnaround and quality. Customers see printing products as almost commodities. Customers expect salespeople to provide accurate quotes and timely product information. Salespeople, who are well organized, effectively target customers and decision makers, manage their time well and maintain high sales activity rates are most successful.

Contract Selling

What it is: The third common selling process in printing is contract selling. This approach relies on a strong focus in the purchasing or print buying departments.

Purchasing departments tend to be commodity buyers. The objective here is to become a preferred vendor and win on unique bid specs and price where ever possible. Orders tend to be large but very price sensitive.

When to use it: Many large companies require their end users of printing to work through or with their purchasing departments. The theory is that professional print buyers are best trained and most knowledgeable on how to manage printing requirements and work with printing companies. Based on a bid, request for proposal, or preferred vendor status, printers must respond to a specific and established set of requirements.

Why it works: The skill and knowledge necessary to close large accounts is not to be underestimated. Again, if you have the right technology and the right set of services, a few large contract accounts can make a printer and salesperson very successful. Through a combination of building relationships, knowing customer requirements, influencing print specifications and working through account bureaucracy, very large orders can be obtained. Knowing and effectively implementing the steps of a contract sales process is a requirement to gain business in many accounts.

New and Emerging Product Selling

What it is: This is the most successful and sustainable approach for selling new, technical and more complex printing capabilities and services. This is most difficult sales process to master. No matter what it is formally called, this approach is a requirement in situations where print providers are selling new and emerging products and services such as complex integrated marketing campaigns or sophisticated and technical direct mail programs, and where customers need to be educated and informed.

When to use it: This sales situation is where relationships have not been established yet and the buyers may be non traditional printing contacts. Selling often must be made to multiple levels of decision makers. Learning about the customer's business and problems, building coalitions, generating tailored and convincing value propositions, creating strong selling proposals, making sales presentations are some of the key steps in this selling process.

Why it works: These are buyers who are looking for new ideas to solve communication or general business problems. They want and need salespeople to thoroughly know their business and customers. Though this is the most challenging sales approach and require the most skill, the margins and opportunities for printers and salespeople are the greatest.

What Is the Best Sales Process?

Before settling on the best sales process, salespeople and printing company owners and managers should look closely at exactly what they sell and how customers typically make decisions to do business with their company. Most skilled salespeople use a variety of sales processes depending on the type of customers and customer requirements.

Determining the right sales process is critical for printing companies managing a direct sales program and salespeople. It is this approach that is practiced by most high performing salespeople.

The bottom line on determining what is the best sales process. As usual, it depends on your ability to know your customers' business and respond appropriately to their requirements.

Joe Rickard is a sales training leader and consultant who works with printing and technology companies in the graphic arts to improve their sales effectiveness. He is the founder of Intellectual Solutions, a provider of customized sales and sales management training material and services. Contact Rickard at (845) 753-6156, jrickard@intellectives.com, or visit www.intellectivesolutions.com.