

What's Different about Selling Print in a Bad Economy?

By Joe Rickard

We have been hearing a steady drumbeat of economic problems from analysts and pundits over the past few months. This has created fear and uncertainty for all of us—from printing salespeople to buyers of print solutions.

During this recession while customers will continue buy billions of dollars of printing, aggressive salespeople will be looking to increase their share of the business at the expense of less confident and effective salespeople. Having lived, managed, and sold in at least three recessionary cycles since the early 1980s, I have observed top salespeople successfully adjust and adapt their sales activities during tough times.

Even in a bad economy, customers continue to buy billions of printing products and services.

In addition to my own experiences, I recently researched in *Printing News* how top salespeople and companies approached shrinking sales in the Great Depression during the 1930s. Though this downturn and the Great Depression may be very different, there are some similarities worth noting.

For instance, printing executive Albert Vela in a speech reflecting on the Great Depression to the Young Printing Executive Club of New York in 1945 remarked, "It is during times of depression when business people are seeking means of moving their products off shelves or out of warehouses, or are looking for markets for their services, that the printing salesperson has his opportunity to help them and at the same time to create more business for themselves."

In 1938, printer Richard Messner declared that printers should take a tip from the movies and create situations that really market printing. He went on to explain that salespeople should understand competing media (e.g., the new media of television), understand competing printing processes, generate new ideas and interest-generating applications, reduce inventory waste and obsolescence, and improve their lead generation and marketing programs.

In another edition of *Printing News* in 1939, Agnes Mengel, printing buyer for Paramount Pictures, declared that too many printing salespeople call on accounts unequipped to "speak our language." Too often she said they do not know the capacities of their own plants and do not know the problems of the account and thus waste their

time and that of the prospect. In the same issue, printer Daniel Moscow stated, "I have no respect for a salesperson that sells only on price. Look around you for undiscovered markets, and in these you will find opportunities for expansion. Prepare to outsell by ability, initiative, and not by imitation.

Be prepared for layoffs, downsizing, and cost cutting on your accounts. Most importantly, have a backup plan if your key customer contact loses his or her job.

The bottom line of my findings are that though the technology continues to change, the basic sales skills required to sell have not changed and that top salespeople continue to sell and prosper even during tough times.

How to Sell in a Tough Economy

Below are some of the "sales behaviors" required in a tough economy.

- ✓ Overcome fear and subsequent sales call paralysis

Muting and overcoming the continuous negativity about the economy and overcoming fear, helps maintain a positive attitude. Don't let others affect your attitude and performance. You need to be realistic but do not focus on bad news. Negativity and fear are huge barriers for salespeople. Top salespeople see bad times as an opportunity to gain new business. Customers faced with reduced budgets and cutbacks are looking for new ideas and solutions. Confidence, a positive attitude and high sales activities of printing salespeople are key predictors of success.

- ✓ Prepare for the obvious objection

Most salespeople lose to the same three or four objections that can be heard at anytime during a sales cycle. In a recession, you can count on hearing, "Our marketing budgets have been cut and we have no money for new campaigns or programs."

This is great opening for prepared salespeople. Potential answers could include, "I understand Ms. Jones, and some of our customers have expressed the same concern. We have been helping our customers generate exciting new direct mail programs that not only have reduced costs dramatically but have generated excellent ROI. Have you looked at some new ways to create customer demand?"

- ✓ Stay close to your customers

If there was ever a time to know your customers business and their problems, it is now. Relationships are the major driver of printing sales. If it is possible, get closer and intensify your relationships with each customer. Take it one step further in this economy. What exactly does your customer need NOW to do to be successful?

Be prepared for layoffs, downsizing, and cost cutting on your accounts. Most importantly, have a backup plan if your key customer contact loses his or her job. For example, you should know who to call above and below the level of your regular contact. Who would likely take their day-to-day responsibilities? Remember, your customers may be overcome with fear. What can you do to help them succeed and keep their job?

- ✓ Do not yield to competing media

Printing is a major form of communication for companies as it helps them sell their goods and services, reduce inventories and increase cash flow. This is a big deal. Each media delivery method has its strengths and limitations. For example, more and more companies and end user customers are getting Web fatigue. They are finding that in a spam-saturated world, returns on investment in Web-based delivery can often not live up to the hype.

Know competitive media as well as you know the competitive printing processes. In our research, we seldom see broadcast or Web-based media salespeople sell printing. It is okay to sell printing as a complementary media to others but it is never okay to concede that print media has lost its value or place in the media mix. That is simply not the case.

- ✓ Increase the prospecting levels for new clients

As customers face economic challenges, they will look for alternatives to their current methods. They also must sell and market in a tough economy. Come prepared with new ideas and services. Use networking strategies to identify "warm" calls versus cold calls. "Warm" calls are those calls on prospects that you have been introduced to through a third party. In addition to traditional networking organizations and strategies, use business networking portals such as LinkedIn.

I am amazed at how few printing salespeople and executives use these business networking vehicles. Online business networking portals are convenient places for busy people to not only maintain contact with friends, business colleagues and customers but also to network into targeted accounts. Networking and reference selling are the most effective way to generate qualified leads and opportunities.

- ✓ Create a marketing event on each sales call

Do not waste ANY sales call. For each opportunity, create an exciting presentation that demonstrates creativity and knowledge of the customer's business. Whatever it takes to "wow" your prospect, do it. Research shows that creativity and confidence are major differentiators between average and top sales people. Your energy and good ideas will arouse curiosity and interest among your prospects.

To get started, the first step is to rethink your sales planning assumptions and territory marketing plans. Meet with the key players in your shop including the owner or general manager and brainstorm ideas with them. What new products and services that you could present to prospects? Lay out a sales activity plan and schedule it in writing: what specifically needs to be done, what companies should be targeted, who should be called, and what you need to create an exciting sales call to generate interest.

Another important step is to rethink, prepare, and practice your value propositions. That is, what do you sell, why is it different from other competitors, and what specific value will it give your customers. These value propositions are the linchpin for every call and presentation.

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