

I have been a print buyer for 25-plus years, giving me a unique, inside perspective of the industry. As a "Print Buyerologist™, as I like to call myself, I know what makes buyers tick — and what ticks them off. After producing thousands of projects and working with hundreds of service providers over the years, I have learned how to create beneficial relationships with print customers as well as the dos and don'ts that have helped many get a foot in the door.

I define sales as the result of a relationship and a need. The need is what gets you into the room — specific capabilities, processes, price points, etc. — but the relationship will ultimately get you the job. The following are five ways you can build relationships with your customers and prospects.

Know Yourself

This might sound simple, but in my experience it hasn't always been common knowledge. As the industry is evolving, buyers are confused about core competencies. They want to know the real you, not the first-date you who has to say all the right things. If you start your relationship with your strongest services, you create trust. Once you establish that, you can move into other areas.

Know Your Buyers

Your buyer's time is as limited as yours, so learn about them and approach them as a prospect in a manner that shows you did your research. Tell them how you're connected (if that connection exists) and look at their company site and comment about their work. As fast as possible, you want to remove yourself from being just another call, email or package from some vendor. That advice applies if they're a current customer, too. Visit their site and drop them a note when you see something new and interesting — even if you didn't print it. Buyers will remember you cared enough to pay attention to what they do, especially if it isn't sales related.

Add Real Value

There is a big difference between adding value and providing a service. Whether you charge for it or not, fix their files, proofread, be on press for them, etc. Any such action that's ancillary from a paid service is appreciated, especially when it saves the day.

Let's assume that after years of trial and error, your buyer's vendor pool only consists of vendors that do the expected. What ways can you add value to your relationship? The answer is the result of this equation: Knowing You + Knowing Them = X.

For example, your company has extensive finishing experience, and you notice your buyers have started producing a lot of print that incorporates high-end finishes. Whether or not they're printing with you, there's an added value for you to help them with education. It could be as simple as sharing an article about specialty substrates, or a more formal event such as a monthly class with different topics. Buyers really appreciate learning things that make them more valuable to their company and their clients. But remember, this is about teaching them, not pitching them. Your reward will come when they implement processes you taught them about, and then use you to execute.

Be Relevant

The market dictates what's valuable by its relevancy. Introducing



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a new product or service to your customers might be valuable, but what's relevant is how it can specifically work for them. If you cannot address that, you shouldn't be sharing that information with them — it's fishing. And, if you are going to introduce a new product or print service to your buyers using a medium other than a face-to-face meeting, make it personal. An email sent to "Dear Valued Customer" doesn't say much about your relationship. Give them specific examples of how this could work for their audience. Create a sample using one of their clients or their company, and then connect them to it — and to you. Help your buyers present it to their team, offer to bring some bagels and do it over breakfast.

Invest in the Future

Traditional and knowledgeable print buyers are going to be harder to come across as the industry evolves. Pay attention to new hires and people changing jobs. Introduce yourself and welcome them to your market. Be different by not pitching anything other than an offer of mentorship, should the need arise. When it's relevant, send your buyers industry updates and articles — even from your blog — about new printing techniques or technologies that you think would be helpful to them and their growth. Keep it 100-percent pitch free. This is the long game, and if you're patient, you can be rewarded with colleagues who become customers when they're ready.

As a printer, your buyers — and their business — are what will boost your bottom line. But before you can get to those sales, you must remember these five factors. By following them, you will create a trusting relationship with your buyer, which will ultimately lead you to sales. Once you've established that relationship, however, you must work to sustain it. Here are four ways to sustain your relationship with your buyers — without being annoying in the process:

Newsletters

Before you jump on this, I want to be clear that I am not suggesting you send your clients and prospects a sales pitch in the form of a newsletter. Be creative and think out of the box!

Make your newsletter more of a love letter to the industry and to the people who support it. Include info about fun and funky prints from around the world. Showcase something you have printed recently that is new and unusual, and include the production specs. Do interviews with designers and buyers in a "meet the community" type of approach. Offer tips from your experts on file prep, color management, choosing paper, working with digital presses and other printing processes. Pass along job opportunities as you hear about them, and congratulate customers on promotions. You can even toss in some information about your business and capabilities, as long as it isn't a sales pitch.

Social Media

We are talking about sustaining relationships, not generating new followers. In that spirit, when was the last time you actually looked to see who is paying attention to you? Are you sharing information relevant to your buyers, and through the relevant channels?

A million likes and a million followers mean nothing if your audience is not engaged with you. Take time every day to go through your connections, and make a comment or add to something they



have shared. That does not mean things such as, "Next time call us, we can print this for you." Additionally, weed out and remove irrelevant and inactive people you are following to streamline your social feeds. Your focus should be on building better connections with the active audience and sharing information that they will use and share themselves.

Education

Most buyers do not have an opportunity to attend trade shows or receive the financial support they need for continuing education. Beyond that, many buyers I've spoken to and worked with have expressed a fear when it comes to asking too many questions where they work. Printers and service providers sit in a unique and value-filled spot by being able to help teach buyers.

Whether you do lunch-and-learn webinars, include education in your newsletter or hold monthly events at your shop, you will be rewarded in print karma and more (remember, no sales pitches!). Buyers need to stay relevant and be able to bring new opportunities to their collective tables. Be the one to help them do it.

Where printers usually go wrong is in the follow-up. Instead of thanking people for connecting and then sneaking in anything about your services, simply thank them and ask if they have any additional questions, suggestions for upcoming topics and/or general comments about the event they attended. Follow up on your follow-ups to move beyond the initial printer/buyer relationship to something more solid and long lasting.

Chill

Whether you take all or none of my Print Buyerologist advice, the biggest tip I can offer you is simply to be cool. Help your buyers when they need help, answer their questions, be there for them without being overbearing, contact them when appropriate, and most important — be a true partner and person they like to have around.

At this year's 2015 SGIA Expo, SGIA has invited me to join them in their membership booth to share trade show happenings on social media and make videos with attendees and exhibitors. Stop by and share your print story — I'd love to hear it, and so will the community!

Deborah Corn is the Intergalactic Ambassador to The Printerverse at Print Media Centr, a Print Buyerologist™, Integrated Marketer, Industry Speaker and Blogger, Cultivator of the Print Production Professionals Group, the #1 Print Group on LinkedIn, and host of the weekly industry #PrintChat on Twitter. She has more than 25 years experience working in advertising and marketing, and currently works behind the scenes with printers, suppliers and industry organizations helping them achieve success with their cross media and social media marketing endeavors.

