

A man and a woman in business attire are looking at a tablet together. The man, on the right, has a beard and is wearing a dark suit with a patterned tie. The woman, on the left, is wearing a light-colored blazer. They are both smiling and looking at the tablet. The background is a bright, modern office setting.

Proven Strategies for Selling Print to the Top Level

Printing Impressions

Selling to Marketers, Brand Owners, and C-Level Execs

How can print service providers' salespeople bypass traditional print buyers in order to reach marketers, brand owners, and C-level executives? Three experts weigh in with some of the best strategies for selling to the top level.

By Lauren Searson

For today's print service providers (PSPs), the phrase "getting your foot in the door" has taken on a different meaning, and a different strategy. When it comes to securing — and maintaining — new business, an organization's print buyer might seem the obvious route, but it's not necessarily the right one. If commercial printers want to go beyond the bidding wars, they must take the conversation to the next level, literally, and engage marketers, brand owners, and C-level executives.

But how do you get your foot in the door with these individuals, and what do you say once you do? Three expert industry consultants weigh in with successful strategies for selling to the top level.

A Well-Thought-Out Approach

Bill Farquharson, founder of AspireFor and a regular contributor to *Printing Impressions*, says PSPs need to grab the attention of marketers, brand owners, and C-level executives if they want to "sell profitably, stop quoting jobs, win an account for their idea, and sell it for years to come."

But when it comes to the approach, he points out that sales representatives need to stop asking organizations who is responsible for the buy-in, or who the best point of contact is. Before any type of outreach, salespeople must understand their prospective customers' missions, goals, and challenges in their respective markets and, ultimately, the solutions they can bring to the table.

"Look at their websites, research their verticals, understand what your prospects do, and what they're trying to do. There's no excuse for not doing this," Farquharson notes.

This research is ultimately what points PSPs to the appropriate points of contact, and those most closely tied to the organization's goals and success: the senior decision-makers.

According to Kate Dunn, president of The Evolve Sales Group, "The most important thing is to go to the person who owns the objective — not the person tasked with the execution of it." In other words, print buyers are often merely sourcing for a job that has been determined is needed, and are going to seek PSPs they think can do it, oftentimes leading to a price battle.

She offers the example of COVID-19's impact on post-secondary education. "I'd want to talk to admissions VPs about how COVID-19 is going to disrupt student recruitment, and how I think they can minimize this through virtual tours and other interactive print pieces that give prospective students the feeling of actually being there."

Referring to that top level as the "influencers," Barb Pellow, a principal at Pellow and Partners, stresses that in addition to

understanding their challenges and needs, it's important to educate these individuals on the possibilities print offers. "The executive is looking for a partner that can do it all. They don't want to have to go to one place for an email campaign and another for print services — they don't want to be that integrator. They might not buy everything from you, but you have to portray yourself as the partner that has the right breadth of skill sets."

Differentiating Yourself With Metrics

When selling to prospective customers and trying to differentiate themselves from the competition, Dunn says PSPs and their sales reps can get caught up in thinking they're just selling print.



SUCCESS CASE EXAMPLES NEED TO SHOW AN IMPACT.

— KATE DUNN

"They're not selling print; they're selling what the print does, whether it's a package design that gets a product picked up faster, or a direct mail piece that says, 'Come to my store and buy something,'" she explains. "Saying, 'I'm a great printer,' only appeals to the people who are looking for someone to execute. It doesn't say how you're increasing the response rates or creating more brand engagement."

Pellow echoes these sentiments, citing a recent NAPCO Research report "Adding Value to Digital Print," in which 94% of surveyed brand owners and marketers indicated that providing unique ideas to enhance the print they purchase has a level of importance when selecting a printer. PSPs proactively educating them on new technologies and special effects garnered a similar response at 93%.

"Translate your services into something that's going to help people retain an existing customer, acquire a new client, build brand awareness, and offer a return on investment (ROI) with their marketing dollars," she says. "The print buyer will just think, 'What does it cost?' The executive is thinking, 'How can I do better at communicating and improving my ROI?'"

According to Pellow, decision-makers want information they can't learn elsewhere; insights from a deep understanding of not only their company and industry, but their competitors; and innovative thinking that helps them become more competitive. She references "The Challenger Sale: Taking Control

of the Customer Conversation,” in which Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson write, “Customers put the highest value on salespeople who make them think, bring new ideas, and find creative and innovative ways to help their business.”

In other words, salespeople should be prepared with the data and metrics to convey the concepts and impact of those standout samples they’re presenting.

“If you’re having a conversation with a marketing VP, you want to talk about how you’ve accomplished marketing initiatives, such as increasing response rates, or generating leads by X percent,” Dunn adds. “We can’t say, ‘look at this sample,’ with no metrics other than saying the customer loved it. Success cases need to show an impact.”

Breaking Barriers Without Breaking Trust

It’s understood, however, that landing a meeting with top executives is not always an easy feat. Between caller ID, ignored voicemails, or blocked emails, “decision-makers have a moat around the castle,” says Farquharson, who is a big believer that marketing is the new sales. “Salespeople need to do a better job of building brands and sharing success stories using social media, writing white papers, creating YouTube videos, etc. This helps circumvent the walls decision-makers have put up. It’s not hard, and it’s free.”

If it comes down to it, he notes, go down that main street. “You can say it’s been hard to get a hold of someone, but you have an idea to help their company, and though your methodology might not be to their approval, your heart’s in the right place.”

Dunn advises not to hesitate to use a potential connection, but adds that PSPs need to have a compelling message to get the customer’s attention. She suggests reaching out on a weekly basis using a variety of channels, and emphasizes having three or four sound talking points so that each message is different.

Dunn also recommends account-based marketing, which means simultaneously targeting multiple senior contacts within the account with the same concept, but curating the message to their unique points of view. In using her previous example on post-secondary education, this might mean communicating with a university CFO about the impact of losing more upper-class students than thought, while contacting those in charge of the student body to talk about ways to keep students engaged with the university while studying from home.

But how do these efforts in selling to the top level impact a PSP’s relationship with the print buyer? The experts say targeting one group doesn’t automatically equate to excluding another.

“You have to engage print buyers as well as the marketers,” Pellow says. “Buyers are looking to demonstrate they have value in this process, too. The key is educating both parties on ideas to an extent. Even a print buyer is interested in special effects, but will bring it down to price per piece. The buyer doesn’t want to look stupid to the marketing executive, so it’s about educating them on parallel paths.”

If there’s already a relationship with the print buyer, Dunn says PSPs need to look at how that business dynamic is progressing. “If you keep losing business, that relationship is already disrupted. Your choices then are to keep letting business slowly decline by talking to the print buyer and quoting and hoping, or elevating to that higher level to try and add value that enhances the relationship. Many times, salespeople don’t even ask their contact to help them reach higher levels. When they do

and their buyer won’t help them get those meetings, that says the print buyers don’t see them as a partner, but only a supplier with a good price occasionally.”

The best strategy, Dunn says, is selling correctly in the beginning — and to all the right people. “There are six to eight people involved in B2B sales decisions today. The print buyer is in there but, if you do it right, the other seven are the higher-level people.”

For existing accounts, this interaction, she adds, can also be in the form of an “External Account Review,” in which PSPs ask to bring in the top-level individuals on both sides to discuss opportunities and risks for the customer’s business. “Bigger printers do this already, but all printers should do it to both elevate and expand the relationship, and the amount of revenue the customer generates,” she adds.

Just like every story, there are two sides in every sales transac-



DECISION MAKERS WANT INSIGHTS AND UNIQUE IDEAS THAT THEY CAN’T LEARN ELSEWHERE.

— BARB PELLOW

tion. As PSPs think strategically about whom they’re selling to, it’s imperative to also look at their sales representatives. Dunn notes that salespeople are not always privy to the capabilities and solutions printers can ultimately provide.

“Most can say, ‘here’s the quote,’ and suggest paper stock, but the concept of, ‘here’s what your problem might be and I have some ideas on how to fix it,’ is foreign to them,” she points out.

But the experts also agree that in order to build successful relationships with customers, it’s more about quality versus quantity. Dunn notes the more cost-effective model and best way to develop and maintain customer relationships is having 30-40 good accounts, versus hundreds that consist of one or two smaller jobs.

Stop Selling Based on One-Off Jobs

“We need to stop selling jobs — what you want is a customer. It’s not a matter of, ‘let me win this job and I’ll get all this other business.’ There’s no science to getting that other business now,” she contends. “They’re hoping the customer loves them and wants them to do more.”

Although Farquharson encourages persistence and diligence, when the conversation turns into a price battle, he encourages salespeople to not revert back to the bad sales call. “You have to be bold enough to say, ‘I know there are lower prices out there, and it’s a race to the bottom. If you’re looking for the lowest price, you’re not my customer.’”

It’s important for PSPs to understand a sale might not happen as a result of one conversation, which is why continual marketing is essential. According to Dunn, at any given time, only 3% of the PSPs’ target audience are buying now, while another 6-7% could be open to it.

“Your message might not resonate with the majority of people you’re reaching at that time, but it plants seeds that make them think and that differentiate your company as a provider,



DON'T GET CAUGHT UP IN A PRICE WAR RACE TO THE BOTTOM.

— BILL FARQUHARSON

so that people remember you when they want to understand their problem and potential solutions,” she says. “Marketing and sales messaging shouldn’t just focus on the here and now.”

And if the message has resonated and you have landed an account, Farquharson emphasizes how important it is that PSPs never rest on their laurels.

“You’re only as good as the last job you shipped,” he says, “The No. 1 reason why we lose an account is not price, incorrect delivery, or messing up a job — it’s because the client thinks we’ve stopped working for them.

“You have to challenge every assumption and come in with new ideas. Even if they reject them, it still gives you the chance to say you’re not taking their business for granted, and will always work to earn it and come in with new ideas.” ●

WHO WE ARE

Printing Impressions

For 61 years, *Printing Impressions* has provided authoritative coverage and analysis on industry trends, emerging technologies, and graphic arts industry news, with a focus on the commercial printing segment. We connect with our audience via a monthly publication; a daily e-newsletter; videos; webinars; the Inkjet Summit; and the “Show Daily” for PRINTING United, the largest industry trade show in North America.

NAPCOMEDIA

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