

Who Is Tomorrow's Digital Print Sales Person?

By Teri Nagi

Never in the history of print marketing has the role and responsibilities of the professional print sales representative faced massive change, as it does today and in the future. Change is being forced by a number of factors including:

- Apparent lack of qualified sales candidates who can provide a return on dollars invested in them within a reasonable period of time.
- The challenge of shorter runs, therefore smaller dollar value of individual orders, and how much can a printer spend to obtain these shorter run, smaller value orders.
- Digital transformation of the industry, with its requirement for enhanced technical skills and technology knowledge by the print sales professional.
- The immediacy issue where clients want to talk to someone right now, and don't want to wait for a return call from a sales professional.
- The shrinking net profits of printers, who now must seek new ways to reduce their overall expenses.

In the past two to three years, many printers have downsized their internal operations and made them more efficient. Some have purchased new digital technologies to provide higher productivity per labor dollar invested. Many printers have added digital printing capabilities. Office staffs have often been downsized. Computer systems have made estimators more efficient. One of the few areas left for significant savings is in sales and marketing.

So What is Happening Now?

Recent surveys indicate their ratio of customer service representatives to sales representatives in the printing industries is increasing. In years past it was two professional print sales representatives to a single CSR. Today, it is approximately 1.5 professional print sales representatives to that CSR. More and more, customer service representatives are handling complete client communications and job print order administration, from order initiation to out-the-door, with limited intervention by the professional print sales representative. This trend will most likely continue as customers demand immediate replies, especially in their digital printing needs (if you can't communicate quickly and efficiently, how can a printer be trusted to digitally print quickly and efficiently), someone in the office who is knowledgeable about their order (understands the processes involved in digital printing), and can immediately confer with appropriate production people to obtain order status.

For many printers, the assignment of a customer service representative to individual customers has created a stronger relationship between the client and the printer. It is no longer just the sales representative who represents the company, but also an internal resource that is readily available. Most growth in company loyalty in the past few years can be attributed to this team approach. It is one of the reasons professional print sales representatives are staying with their current printer, versus moving from one printer to another as experienced in the past.

An additional trend is the introduction and rapid growth of the technical sales representative. Although most of these positions are found in smaller, digitally oriented companies including short run and variable printing, wide format, grand format printers, etc., as digital presses gain rapid acceptance in the traditional print industry, the position of the technical sales representative will accelerate in growth.

These individuals are normally recruited from print schools or business colleges with a computer orientation. They are familiar with computer technologies (both hardware and software) and can readily understand the printing industry's growth from desktop to digital provider. They often enter the printing industry as a customer service representative or pre media technician. As a technical sales representative, they act as a digital technologist advisor versus selling clients, and are often actively involved in customer projects from initiation to out-the-door. These individuals are often a combination of sales person and customer service representative, paid on salary plus bonus, and represent a new breed of sales representatives for the future.

So What is The Future?

There is no doubt that the role of the traditional sales representative will change in the future. Some of the major changes to observe and plan for in the future follow.

In many print operations, especially with digital printing capabilities, the number of customer service representatives per sales representatives will increase. Customer service people will continue to grow in responsibilities and importance in handling customer communications from the moment an order is received, to checking satisfaction after the order is shipped. The number of actual sales representatives in the printing industry may not grow significantly, while the numbers of customer service representatives will. The digital print sales representative of tomorrow will be oriented towards new account development, spending the first year with a new client cementing their relationship, and then turning over that account to a strong internal customer service representative. Customer service representatives might be more appropriately called sales account managers.

New account sales representatives will be compensated with a significant incentive or bonus for each new account opened and high incentive for the first year of developing that account. Thereafter they may receive a small incentive, while the sales account manager receives a salary plus bonus for increases year to year with clients assigned to their responsibility. In the future, we can expect professional print sales representatives to be killer new account opener while customer service people will become strong inside sales maintainers.

This will be increasingly important as average order values decrease in the printing industry. It also allows printing companies to search for technically proficient people who normally do not want to be outside sales representatives. The internal sales account manager, with computer and digital knowledge, could well be a strong factor in the printing industry in the future.

This scenario is the current experience of smaller, digitally oriented printers in their hiring of tech-reps. This trend should increase in the future. In the future, most printers will offer both traditional and digital print outputs. In addition, many will also offer multimedia formatting in their digital prepress department as well as multimedia outputs to Internets, Web-to-Print, and other non-

traditional production. With an ever-increasing number of clients being served, satisfying client needs through a single digital technician will be impossible. The growth of tech-reps, being part of a client's digital preparation as well as handling their jobs through production, could be phenomenal.

Opening new accounts will still be the role of the professional print sales representatives. Tech-reps and the new account sales person may be a member of their team for joint selling. Once a prospect has been converted to a client, and after a year of nurturing, the tech-rep could be the main contact agent for that client. The professional sales representatives would make infrequent calls, and would be paid a small incentive for all sales. The tech-rep would make frequent telephone and infrequent in-person telephone calls, except when working on the project, and would receive a salary plus incentive. Over the years, there have been many suggestions on how and why to compensate customer service representatives on an incentive basis, for the work they do with the company's clients. The time for this happening may be soon upon us.

A possible compensation plan in the future for a new account professional print sales representatives would double their normal incentive for the first year and then reduce it to 15% of normal incentive for the years that follow. This will drive these professional print sales representatives towards the procurement of new business, which is so difficult to achieve, and provide an annuity and one of the reasons for these same sales representatives to keep in touch with long-term clients.

At the same time, this overcomes one of the main complaints of customer service representatives and tech-representatives that are voiced today. "I handle all the work and the sales representative gets all the commissions!" With an incentive paid to the customer service representative, sales account manager, tech-rep or whatever we call them, based either on volumes of work handled or increase in work handled one year to the next, these internal resources will become more intricately involved in total customer satisfaction, and be compensated for their efforts.

Recruitment of resources for sales will continue to change. In the past, one of the main sources for professional sales representatives was from a competitor. We all know how hard this is to do today. More and more, printers are looking internally to current production or customer service individuals to become outside sales representatives, or recruiting college graduates to serve inside before becoming a professional print sales representative. This trend will accelerate in the future.

Recruitment on college campuses will be on the increase. Print schools will be primary targets, but all colleges will be a resource for computer literate individuals who want to be involved in customer satisfaction, but not direct face-to-face continuity selling. The printing industry is becoming an ever more attractive place to work, with its family orientation, small business outlook, opportunity for fast growth of new talent, and technology orientation.

We will see no significant growth in the number of professional sales representatives in the printing industry. At the same time, the number of customer service representatives could increase by 25% to 40%. There will be an explosive growth in the number of tech-representatives. Printers will merely have to add these realities to the set of challenges they face as they move from printers to information processors.

The Move by Printers to Digital Production

Successful traditional printers moving into digital print sales have found the following major differences in selling digital versus traditional:

Non-Purchasing Agent Orientation. The digital sales representative must simply deal with a larger number of people, all with significantly different issues.

A Consultative Approach. The digital sales representative must first listen for the needs and the goals, often by asking predetermined and rehearsed questions, and then provide a provable solution.

Increased Technical Skills. The successful digital sales representative of tomorrow must be familiar with a broader range of technical subjects, from database management to pre-media, reformatting of origination and multimedia outputs.

Significant Up-Front Investment in Sales Activities of Both Time and Money. The selling process will simply take longer before sales are made and profits return. Tomorrow's successful digital print sales representative as well as management must be patient and be willing to stay the course.

Team Player. The most resourceful sales representatives realize the importance of the expertise of production employees. In the future this will include not only the pre-media (formerly desktop) manager and their technicians, but also their technicians in database management, fulfillment, mailing, etc.

Briefly, here are some basic rules of selling digital printing.

- Start with your current customer.
- Approach people who make marketing and sales decisions.
- Brainstorm with them about creative targeting, marketing messages, and customized promotion.
- Find the source of the data that can be the center point for the variable print or short run digital print campaign.
- Understand the difference between Customer Transaction Files (CTF), which are cumbersome, complex and not suggested for one-to-one marketing communications; and Marketing Customer Information Files (MCIF), which are preferred.
- Where possible, always run a test program.
- Don't shy away from complex jobs.
- Don't be put off by databases with large numbers of variable fields as the numbers are irrelevant.
- Where possible, avoid the customer's purchasing department.
- Find the document owners.
- As already said many times, first consult, then sell.
- Build strong strategic partnerships with current and future customers. The sales representative must remember they're selling a process, not a printed piece.

The marketing of digital printing must both assist and encourage the sales representative to understand the buying style and needs of the various job responsibilities involved in the purchase of digital print. In addition, it must also expand their understanding of the individual personalities of the incumbents in these positions. This is all initiated via research into who is the owner of the print product, and what individuals will have a significant impact on the selection of their printer as well as will they convert to a variable or short run print solution.

The next step is to select a product most likely to fit a one-to-one or short run digital print opportunity. This could be either current print products, but more likely will be new additions never before used by the customer.

Once the product has been selected, the next step is to discuss with the prime contact or appropriate influencer:

- Who is the target audience?
- What is the objective of the printed piece?
- What is the most likely quantity to be used?
- Appropriate goals to be set to judge the effectiveness of the process.
- Potential problems or obstacles to be dealt with.
- Segmenting desires versus measurable objectives.
- Who actually owns their document?
- Understanding their characteristics and personal objectives.

Also important in this entire process is to investigate the source and type of databases required.

- Are they internally developed or must they be purchased externally?
- What are the characteristics of the data desired?
- Where does this fit in with the company's current CRM efforts?
- What is the knowledge and cooperativeness of the company's IT director?
- What new data must be collected and how?
- What will be the cost of data development and procurement?
- If external data is to be used, who will make the initial contact, and what will be the working relationship between the printer, client, and the database resource?

An important effort for marketing will be the development and maintenance of case studies of successful implementation of short run or variable printing solutions to enhance the marketing capabilities of a company. These would be segmented by industry. These will be extremely useful in sharing with customers first evaluating opportunities in variable and short run digital printing, as well as a point of reference and confirmation as a customer builds their own target marketing print campaign.

These same case studies are extremely useful in building Power Point presentations for use with new prospects, and new influencers within prospect organizations. These Power Point presentations would feature graphics from successful programs, by industry, description of initial objectives, results of the final solution, goals met, approximate costs and key information on the entire process.

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