

Print Shop Sales Development Plan for Poor Economic Times

by Mal Greenberg

Bad times

When recession or just poor economic times reach the American business community, most of us start to wring our hands and wonder whether or not we'll get through it. During this last recession, many print shops in America closed their doors. Printing sales go down because everyone is holding on to every possible dollar, spending only for absolute necessities. The

extra stationery, the flyers, even marketing brochures and ads are put on hold as long as possible.

This plan is probably better suited to small and medium sized shops than it is for large printing companies. The author founded and operated two print shops over a period of twenty three years and has survived several national economic turndowns.

This plan was used several times, but with old fashioned and more expensive training techniques, and was always successful in bringing growth to the shop each time, even in poor economic times.

Read it and try it on. If it doesn't fit, don't use it. It's a small out-of-pocket trial cost with a huge upside possibility.

With incoming jobs at a minimum, print shops owners resort to cutting their expenses. Often, one of the key areas cut is personnel. For small shops, the delivery guy may be expendable. And too often, the sales staff may have to be ejected and the owner gets to go back out on the street to bring in any new

jobs that may show up. Corners are cut wherever possible.

Print Shops aren't alone

But the same thing is happening in other industries. Sales personnel are often the first people on the trim list when things get tight. In tight economic times, they often can't bring in enough sales to cover their own draw and the company is unable to carry them with salaries not covered by incoming sales. Stuff happening in Washington reaches down to the smallest companies in America and everyone feels the pinch.

What NOT to do

Many printers first fire sales and marketing people. BIG mistake! Hard times are when sales and marketing efforts should be beefed up. Problem is, with sales being more difficult, sales reps can't earn the commissions they need to live - especially since they base their sales activities on the way it was before the economic turnaround.

Whether you are in a recession or just coming out of one, it is always important to keep sales and marketing as a top priority. If your present sales reps are not able to bring in sufficient sales to earn a living, we need to find a way to get others to provide that service for us. We live on sales. There is always a way. Make that your mantra!

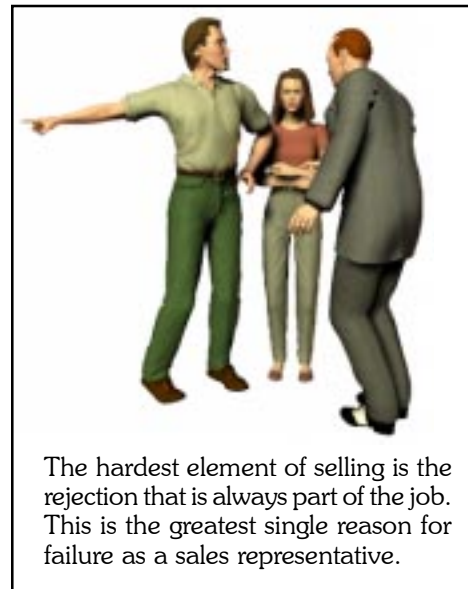
A related marketing plan model

Years ago, and maybe still, many insurance companies used a simple marketing technique that was quite successful in building sales teams. They hired every warm body in sight that seemed willing to sell insurance; explained the potential income for sales people in their industry, spent a fair amount of money to train these people in both selling skills and insurance products and eliminated those people who clearly were not suited for the industry.

Finally, after getting approved and licensed, they were directed to approach every relative and friend and relative of friends and friends of relatives in sight. Since the hardest part of sales work is prospecting and identifying potential new customers, this was pretty much avoided by approaching known entities. In almost all sales work, the rejection received during prospecting is the biggest single factor in failure. They avoided most of this by starting with their brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers.

Even after training, many of these people fell by the wayside when they were out there in the real world. Many others sold policies to their friends and relatives before deciding that finding new prospects was a tough job filled with rejection. But some stayed on, learned the tools of the trade and succeeded in a lifetime career.

For those who fell by the wayside, they found out a little bit about themselves and searched other areas for new careers. For those who sold some policies, they made some money and their customers purchased a good product. For those who stayed on, they found a career. Everybody came out ahead!



The hardest element of selling is the rejection that is always part of the job. This is the greatest single reason for failure as a sales representative.

Let's take a lesson

Now, how can we take a lesson and then translate that for use in the printing industry during hard economic times. Read on - and make your own conclusions.

An age-old question:

A basic question here is: Is it better to hire someone who knows how to sell and has the necessary contact for immediate orders or someone who knows printing but never had any training or experience in sales?

Although there could be arguments on both sides, consider that, in hard times, with low volume of orders, there is an urgency to get jobs brought into the house. Teaching someone to sell will take a lot longer (and have a much higher failure rate) than teaching someone about printing.

Available People

During economic turndowns, unemployment increases. Some of those people who have become unemployed previously sold things like ad space to local businesses. They might have worked for the local newspaper, a local advertising flyer, the yellow pages or other products that brought them into contact with local business people who also, by the way, purchase printing for the respective companies.

With money being generally tight, many parents would jump at the chance to earn an income during the hours when their kids are in school. Some of these people have had successful sales jobs in the past and, although they did not necessarily sell printing, they learned about prospecting and about the sales person's income being directly related to the amount of production brought into the house.

Besides the obvious newspaper classified ads, you might try to make contact with the sales managers of companies that cut back on staff. Most would be happy to try to help their former employees to get new jobs and may be willing to give you names and phone numbers, or at least let some of those people know about your efforts. If a large number of people were let go from a sizeable company, word of your program will get around pretty quickly and you may get a fair number of candidates.

So there are lots of local people who are capable of walking into any number of businesses and going right past the receptionist to the decision maker. Even more, if they have been in the business for any length of time, they know how to prospect and they know about (and can handle) the rejection. Their main problem is that they may know nothing about printing; not product, not services, not prices, not alternatives, not procedures — nothing!

The all-important "Book"

Perhaps the most important asset that these people have is their ability to visit with many decision makers in local companies without the typical problems involved in getting past the receptionist. Any successful advertising sales person has a "book"; a list of corporate decision makers who buy ad space – and probably printing – for their organizations.

Getting past the receptionist, the secretary or the assistant in order to reach someone who has the authority to make a decision is definitely the most difficult part of the sales job. This difficulty alone is responsible for the vast majority of people who quit the selling profession before they really begin. New sales people have trouble accepting what they perceive as personal rejection and, before long, it gets the better of them and they leave. All of this is avoided if we hire someone who has been in sales and who is able to meet with prospective buyers without the hassle of getting past the protectors.

Great prospective sales reps

Clearly, these people are great prospective sales representatives for your company.

The most difficult part of typical training, that is, how to identify and contact prospective buyers, is not needed. They can start on day one with their “book” and be sitting with prospects on their first day in the field.

The training job is to teach them about printing so they can discuss and sell printing jobs to the customers who have, during earlier times, bought advertising space. In years past, training people in all of the variable facets of printing was a time consuming and difficult job; one that often failed even after many hours of work had gone into the training effort.

This is no longer true. Today, programs exist that can do 95% of the training work needed with virtually no production time lost by existing staff. Training costs are therefore minimal and there is no real limit to the number of people who can be trained simultaneously. If you can find these people, there is no reason why you can't hire several of them at the same time. Your cash output is minimal and, within two weeks, the more capable of them will be bringing work into the shop. Not long after that, their production will probably be self-sustaining. That's what good training can do for you!

So here's the basic plan.

Step 1:

Identify people who have had appropriate and successful sales experience. This is not too difficult but it is important to know the criteria you will use to make good selections. Be sure that each one is capable, based on actual former experience, of getting to decision makers in the local community. This should be a major criterion. People lacking this capability should not be included. During the interview, keep in mind that we are looking for people who can get to

Sales. Will train to sell printing. Need 3 years experience selling ad space locally. 555-5555

Printing sales. Paid training if you have 3 years exp selling advertising space. 555-5555

Printing sales. Previous exp in any sales to local business. Will train to sell printing. 555-5555

Here are three sample ads to try in your local newspaper. Minor changes may make a major change in response. Buy the ads for short terms and change them often to find the ones that are most productive.

decision makers of a fair number of local companies quickly and with good rapport. This is your highest priority in the selection process.

Put want ads in the paper, call local employment services, call human resources of companies like the yellow pages or local newspapers who may be willing to help their recently fired people to get a new job. Get the word out in every way you can. The more people who apply, the better.

Ask specifically for people who have recently been selling advertising space to local businesses. Keep in mind that these people have the contacts (like the new insurance salespeople had relatives) who are instant prospects and who absolutely need printing right now. Interview as many as you like but hire only those who have a good 'book' (lists of prospects they have dealt with before). This point cannot be stressed too hard! At least at the beginning, you need to take a hard-nosed approach to selection. Don't be swayed by their attractive appearance, by what you think is a strong sales personality, by their need for a job, by their enthusiasm or anything other than whether or not they have a "book". We can look at other people later, after a sales stream has begun to appear. For now, keep the blinders well in place and stay with the program!

Don't be afraid to explain the entire program to applicants. They should be made aware that you are hoping to take advantage of their previous business contacts and that, if it all works, everybody wins. During the interview, you might ask them to make a mental count of the decision makers that they can call on immediately. The response might be surprising for both of you.

Step 2:

Here's the deal. Training will take about two weeks. Before even interviewing the first person, set up a chart showing the potential earnings for sales volume at different levels. Depending upon many factors, this could be a small stipend or a minimum wage salary during the training period followed by a commission and/or draw after training. It might be a deal where there is no payment during training but an especially high commission during a short period of time after sales work begins. It would be wise to have two or three different plans of remuneration available to allow trainees to select their preference.

But the commission structure ought to be set up so they can see a light at the end of the tunnel. If the commission potential is higher for certain types of jobs (color, designing, mailing services, whatever), show this potential so they can think in terms of where they can sell that type of work.

The general idea here is to put out the least amount of money during the training phase so you can get the largest number of people into the field. Then, the plan should allow for the best income possible for those who succeed. Many people need to have some income, even during training, to cover their normal expenses. Depending upon your financial capabilities, you can provide this as necessary. But to discourage this request from the new people, set it up so those who receive even a small stipend during training earn a smaller commission on jobs they bring

in for some period of time. In other words, reward those people who are willing to take a risk with you in the hope that they can succeed in their new career. If they take risk, be sure to support them in every way possible.

Step 3:

Training in today's world is a lot different than in earlier years. Back then, it was necessary to spend time, one on one, to teach the basics of printing. It took hours and, if you converted those hours to production time, it was very expensive. Today, there are other ways to provide this training at minimal costs. There are numerous computer based training programs available to the printing industry. There are CD-ROM programs which can be done in-house with just one out-of-pocket cost and there are others available on-line with monthly costs attached. There are also consultants in many areas of the country who will come to the shop and train specific people.

To keep training costs to a minimum, we recommend a CD-ROM program that requires only a computer and a bit of space in the corner of the shop. Of the programs listed, we recommend PrintShop 101 because it covers details of production, develops creative idea generation about printed products and discusses some great sales tools. When a trainee successfully completes PrintShop 101, he has a clear understanding of what is needed to go from a idea to a finished printed piece.

Arrange an assertive training schedule during which the people will be at a computer, in the shop, working on a training program. For best learning results, these sessions should not last more than an hour at a sitting but you can arrange for more than one sitting if they are at least two hours apart. Depending upon your available computers, you could easily be training four or five people at the same time. Be available to answer questions that may arise in the program. The better programs don't normally result in extraneous questions. Answers are provided within the context of the program.

Here, the training plan is simple. PrintShop 101 has probably 95% of the information about printing needed to send a sales person out on the street and expect order to come back. Install the program and schedule people for at least two hours per day. There are fourteen chapters,

Available Training Programs

PrintShop 101-www.printshop101.com
This is a complete training course on CD-ROM. Once you own it, you can use it for as many trainees as you want and for as long as you want. It will provide 95% of the information needed for print shop personnel.

PrintScape - www.gain.net/store and enter PrintScape in the search engine. This is good for the second level of this Sales Plan. It provides an excellent overview of the printing industry and the graphics arts community.

Staffing tools - staffingtools.com
This company provides a number of pertinent programs online. As your people develop and become productive, they can be signed up for training modules which are billed individually.

some longer than others, and two hours per day for ten days should be enough. But, for reference, the program stays available for later use as needed.

Step 4:

Inform everyone in the shop about this effort. When the trainees are not at the computer, they should be allowed to roam free in the shop and watch jobs being produced. Let them shadow your CSR's and look over the shoulders of your graphic arts people doing their thing on the computers. Tell all your staff what's happening and encourage your people to answer questions freely. If you have a file of finished projects (always a good idea in a small shop), let them go through and examine them. Encourage them to ask how things were done. If they see a die cut piece, they can ask questions of others and/or go to PrintShop 101 and click on 'Die Cutting' in the index.



With PrintShop 101, the computer truly does most of the work. The program can be used to train any number of people in the shop so training costs are low.

During the latter part of the two weeks, try to have someone on your staff sit with these people and with completed projects and talk about production - especially about how something could have been produced in a different way than it was done. (This requires creativity and knowledge of production methods but it places this sales person far above most others.)

During the whole two week period, ask them to think in terms of their contacts and what types of printing those contacts may need. Their lawyer friend may need business stationery but the clothing store might make good use out of wall posters made on the plotter. Have them try to match types of products with needs of their existing customer base. Have them make lists on paper, not just in memory. Those lists will be handy when they begin making phone contacts.

During the early part of the second week, both you and they will begin to separate themselves into probable successes or failures. Remember never to make a firm determination of the chances of success for any of them. Many will surprise you. Given the opportunity, even those who seem incapable of grasping the content may have it all come together when they meet with their client base. During this second week, have each of them begin to call their contacts and tell them of their impending move to become a sales representative for the best printing company in town. Depending upon their relationships with their client base, some actual appointments may be made. At the least, their prospects will begin to think of them as being able to provide service for their printing needs.

Step 5:

In the third week, the rubber meets the road. They should be out there visiting prospects. In the case where the prospect is potentially a large customer, it might be wise to go with them or send an experienced rep for support. Bottom line, we must remember that our basic objective is to bring in the orders and, hopefully, to keep the new customers as continuing clients even if the sales rep doesn't continue with your company.

They need to honestly explain that they are new to the trade, that they are representing the best printer in town and that satisfaction is guaranteed. It is extremely important that, as jobs are brought in, your customer service people become involved with each new client about the production elements of the job. In the event that the new sales rep leaves, you have a shot at keeping the client as a steady repeat customer.

Step 6:

As they begin to sell, the probability of their success will become apparent to you. Some will approach their old ad space customers and come away with decent printing orders. Others will begin to contact their friends and relatives but clearly avoid any prospecting for new clients. Still others may begin by using their old prospecting tools and habits and you will begin to see some success coming from this. Gradually, the ones who are not successful will drop out. If you have been diligent in your job of working with their customers on the few jobs they brought in, you may get to keep those customers even if the new sales rep resigns.

Besides its powerful use in developing your sales staff, PrintShop 101 should be used with every other person in the shop, regardless of longevity in the printing business. This program covers virtually all of the basics of working in a print shop. There's no reason why people who work in the bindery shouldn't learn about procedures in other areas of the shop. The receptionist would be an exceptional employee if a knowledge of printing were displayed in many of the telephone conversations that happen throughout the day.

Training should NEVER stop, not in printing nor in any other profession.

Chances are, if you have hired several new people for this approach (and you should hire as many as you can find), the fall-off will begin near the end of the third week. Some of them will not be happy with their new profession. Some will find that their 'book' isn't as good or as loyal as they previously thought. But, nothing ventured, nothing gained. Nobody lost anything and both you and they may have gained considerably in both dollars and knowledge. If you lose three quarters of them, you will have hopefully picked up some jobs (and clients) from those who didn't make it and you gained immeasurably in developing your sales staff.

As these sales people evolve into successful printing sales reps, you might tend to slow down on your training efforts. Not a good idea! Training should become a constant part of professional life in the printing industry. PrintShop 101 started them on their sales path. Now look into some of the other programs mentioned above and even more that might be found on the internet. As they develop still higher skills, you can be starting another session of basic training with a new group.

A simple summary:

1. We hired some people to explore the possibility of a new career.
 - a. Some were highly successful and found a new career path.
 - b. Some learned that this was not for them but made some commissions along the way.
 - c. Some learned immediately that this was of no interest which provided some guidance for their future career search.
2. Many new clients had the opportunity to explore the capabilities of a new printing supplier. Hopefully, many found a new lifetime vendor.
3. You had a series of new jobs and new clients come into your company. Hopefully, whether or not the sales person stayed with you, you expanded your customer base. And more. You increased your bottom line!

Everybody wins!

By the way, PrintShop 101 includes a version in Spanish. All you do is click the mouse on the language choice button and everything comes back in Spanish.

It is probably the only graphic arts training program that includes this feature.