



Talking Yourself Out of Sales?

Conversation is the key to avoiding these five sales-stoppers.

Most salespeople talk too much and compound the problem by talking about the wrong things. As a result, they talk themselves out of sales. To stop doing that, here are some thoughts about avoiding the five most common ways it happens.

Too Much Talking, Too Little Listening

Think about how a conversation is supposed to work. One person talks, then the other. The ideal sales conversation is a back-and-forth exchange of information, opinion and perspective.

A salesperson's greatest challenge is to fully understand their counterpart's opinion and perspective. That's where the rationale for every buying decision can be found.

Unfortunately, most printing/graphics salespeople make their presentation and then maybe ask for the order, but they don't do a good job soliciting and addressing the buyer's concerns or objections as part of the process.

Let's consider an even worse transgression:

Buyer: "Let me tell you what concerns me."

Salesperson (answering before the words are fully out of the buyer's mouth): "Wait, I forgot to tell you about how we've been in business for more than 20 years, which means that you can be sure we'll be here for 20 more."

Buyer: "That's not what concerns me."

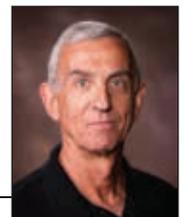
Salesperson (cutting the buyer off again): "Well, I think you should be concerned, because printers are going out of business left and right around here. OK, what was it you wanted to ask me?"

Buyer (looking at her watch): "We'll have to leave that for another time."

Translation: "I don't want to talk to you anymore."

Now, I can hear you thinking, "I would never do that." But be aggressively objective, though, and consider whether you might possibly be guilty of some lesser example of this cardinal sin. For example,

Make sure that what you're doing is a conversation in the first place, a back-and-forth exchange of information, opinion and perspective.



By David M. Fellman, President, David Fellman & Associates



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have you ever raised your voice to talk over your counterpart, just as he or she was beginning to say something? To invoke Dale Carnegie, does that sort of thing help you to win friends and influence people?

Too Much About Features, Too Little About Benefits

In order to fully understand the role of features and benefits in printing and graphics sales, it's important to understand exactly what you're selling. It's not printing! What you're ultimately selling is the printing company you work for. As part of that, you have to sell yourself.

How do most salespeople attempt to position and sell their companies? "We're proud of our quality." "We deliver great service." "We work with many leading companies just like yours." Those are neither features nor benefits. At best, they're promises with no evidence to support them.

Let's dig into the potential of quality. I'd like to suggest three quality-related features: "We have invested in state-of-the-art equipment." "We have a highly trained and highly motivated workforce." "We have strict quality control procedures." All of that can add up to quality.

But is quality really the benefit a

customer might derive from buying from you? Maybe I can best explain it this way. Quality is a thing. The benefit is to be able to count on that thing. So try it this way: "The greatest benefit we provide is to protect you from the problems that can result from a quality failure. Here's how." Then state the three features listed above.

As for selling yourself, what benefit do you bring to the table? Many salespeople talk about their experience. I'd like to suggest that experience is a feature. The knowledge connected to that experience might well be the benefit.

Pitching Instead of Storytelling

Most printing/graphics salespeople seem to employ a presentation style as opposed to a consultative style. In a presentation style, the seller tells the buyer about products, services or capabilities. In a consultative style, the seller asks the buyer about wants and needs. In a presentation style, the seller is saying: "Here is what I want you to know, now make a decision." In a consultative style, the seller is saying: "By asking the right questions and providing you with specific answers, I think I can help you to make the best possible decision."

Even in a consultative style, there comes a point where the seller must present a

proposal. There's a difference, though, between starting with a presentation and finishing with one. In a consultative style, the tailored presentation comes after the needs analysis: "Based on what you've told me about your wants and needs, this is what I think you should do."

Now, here's where the storytelling comes in. With all due respect to the "Star Trek" franchise, very few humans really want to go where no one has gone before. We don't want to take chances; we prefer the tried and true. Print buyers want to make safe choices.

So how do you convince me that you and your company are a safe choice? On one hand, I guess you could tell me in general terms about your experience, and about the knowledge you've gained. On the other hand, you could tell me about specific experiences you've had, and the specific and relevant knowledge you gained. I've found that the words, "Let me tell you a story" can have a huge impact on a sales conversation.

Making It All About Price

Printing/graphics salespeople tell

me that buyers make it all about price. Printing/graphics buyers tell me that it's the salespeople who make it all about price.

"Can I give you a quote on your next print job?" and "Would you like to save money on your printing?" and "If I match that price, will you give me the order?" are not value questions — unless you think value is only about the lowest price. Would you rather have something that costs less or works better? I'll grant you there are printing/graphics buyers who come down on the side of lower price. In my experience, though, they're the minority. But even the majority will be more price conscious if we — the printing industry — continue to put so much emphasis on price.

Here's a challenge: Think back over every sales conversation you had yesterday, including emails and voicemails. How much of it was about price? How many times were you the first one to mention price?

Blind Persistence

Persistence is generally considered to be a positive attribute for a printing/graphics salesperson. Sadly, I've seen far too many

salespeople talk themselves out of a sale through blind persistence, which I define as ongoing contact that adds nothing to a relationship. There are many "pushy" salespeople who call and call and email and call to the point where their message gets deleted the second they're identified. Wouldn't it be better to be the salesperson who engages through creativity and differentiation?

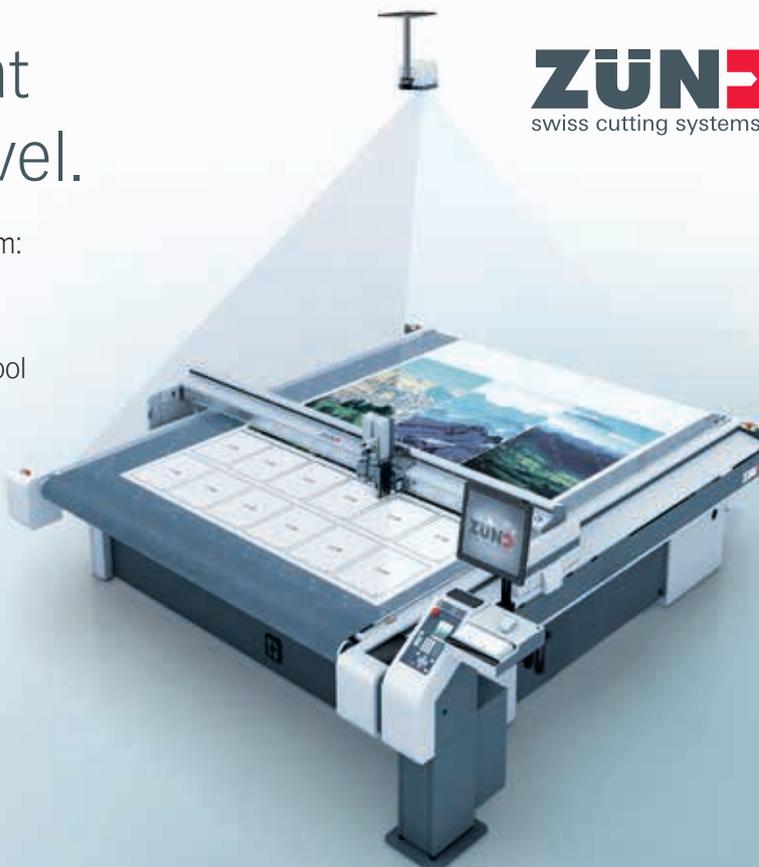
This takes us back to the idea of selling yourself. Yes, it's difficult to get prospects to return calls or emails — probably mostly because we don't give them very good reasons to respond. In fact, I think most salespeople are focusing on the wrong goal at this stage. I get prospecting emails and messages from salespeople that focus on reasons I should buy from them. But the real question in my mind at the prospecting stage is, "Why I should even respond to you?"

Think of it this way: You have to get me to engage with you and communicate with you before you can expect me to buy from you.

Instead of emails and phone messages about your company's equipment or

Digital cutting at an industrial level.

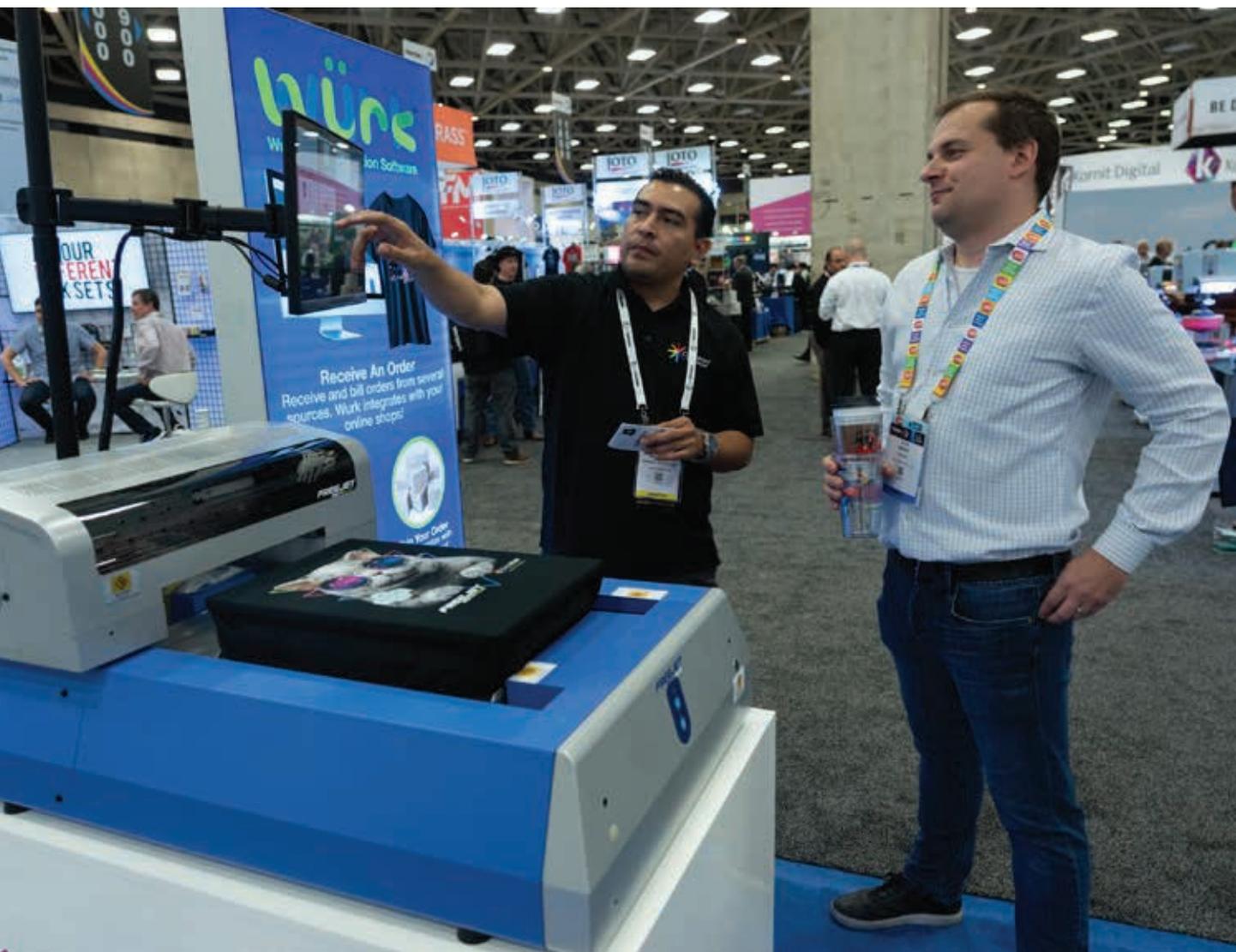
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Yes, it's difficult to get prospects to return calls or emails — probably mostly because we don't give them very good reasons to respond.

capabilities, consider something like this: “If I were you, I’d be wondering if there’s anything that makes this salesperson different from all the others who call on me. Here’s how I would answer that question. I have 15 years of experience, and I think it’s fair to say that I know just about everything that can go wrong with a print project. With me watching over your projects, you get to benefit from everything I’ve learned, and all the mistakes I made when I was a rookie so many years ago. If that would be of value to you, we should at least talk, don’t you agree?”

While this may not be your message, especially if you’re short on experience, the point I want to make is that this is a differentiating strategy. It’s not the “Please call me because I can save you money on your printing” strategy that most salespeople seem to favor.

The Bottom Line

Here’s the bottom line for today. Be

concise and creative in what you say. Be aware of how much of the talking you’re doing in any sales conversation. Make sure that what you’re doing is a conversation in the first place, a back-and-forth exchange of information, opinion and perspective. You still won’t make every sale, but you probably won’t talk yourself out of as many!

David M. Fellman is President of David Fellman & Associates, a sales and marketing consulting firm in Raleigh, N.C., serving numerous segments of the graphic arts industry. He is the author of “Sell More Printing” and “Listen to The Dinosaur,” which Selling Power magazine listed as one of its “10 Best Books to Read in 2010.” His articles on sales, marketing and management topics have appeared in a variety of industry publications, and he is a popular speaker who has delivered seminars and keynotes at industry events across the United States, Canada, England, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand.