

BACK *TO THE* FUTURE

The New Old Sales Skills Required to Sell Inkjet

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think 

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Introduction

We are all in uncharted waters – printers and customers alike. So far this year, the world has experienced unprecedented events including a worldwide shutdown the likes of which no one has seen before. We're a pretty resilient species, us printers. We've gotten good at dealing with recessions and inflations and a few bad sales months here and there, but nothing like this. There are no rules to follow. There are no historical lessons to draw from. You can't call up retired sales reps and ask, "How'd you handle selling during that Spanish Flu 100 years ago?" Empty office buildings. Empty highways. Fear everywhere.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity but was only a couple of months, businesses began slowly reemerging like turtles popping their heads out of a shell. Maybe now, everyone thought, we can get back to business as normal. There was only one problem:

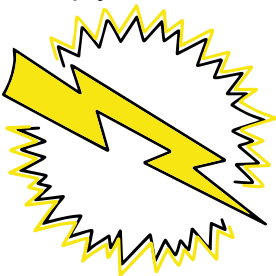
Nothing was normal anymore.

Those expecting business as usual were disappointed, surprised, and unprepared for the new reality: We just don't know what to expect, other than we are certain about the amount of uncertainty.

- Restaurants could open, but with limited capacity and properly spaced tables.
- Retail stores unlocked their doors, but only 8 people per 1000 square feet were allowed in.
- Gyms, hair salons, churches...all were exposed to regulations regarding safety and risk.

Toto, not only are we not in Kansas, we might not even be on the same planet as before!

COVID-19 has left no part of life untouched. Everything has changed...but it's changed in odd and unpredictable ways. For example, that prospect you are trying to connect with is even harder to reach. Not only is she not at her desk, she's not even in the building and probably not even in the town. She's remote. It's like looking for someone in the Witness Protection Program. So, how do we reach her? Phone calls go to voicemail. Emails fall into the abyss. And God only knows what's happening to the items we give to the postal service. The conversation we have with customers have gone from, "We can help you launch that new product line," to "We can help you stay in business."



The market has changed.

The message has changed.

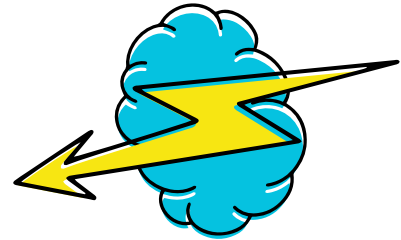
The medium has changed.

But some things haven't changed. What hasn't changed is the need to help our clients. What hasn't changed is the fundamental requirement that we understand their needs and meet them using our traditional print, digital, and inkjet solutions. This is just one selling skill (and they really are skills) that was once optional way back when. Now, they are mandatory if you want to succeed.

The smart, flexible sales rep understands this. Drawing on lessons from the past, a new approach is necessary, an approach that includes many of those same selling skills and techniques from a different era. Much has changed, but some things never do.

A new business reality requires a new sales reality as well. Sure, this is unique and there is no playbook or template, but we are veterans at facing sales adversity and challenges. All it takes is to take a good look at the landscape, see what needs to be adjusted, and get selling, starting with some good news:

The fundamentals of sales do not change.

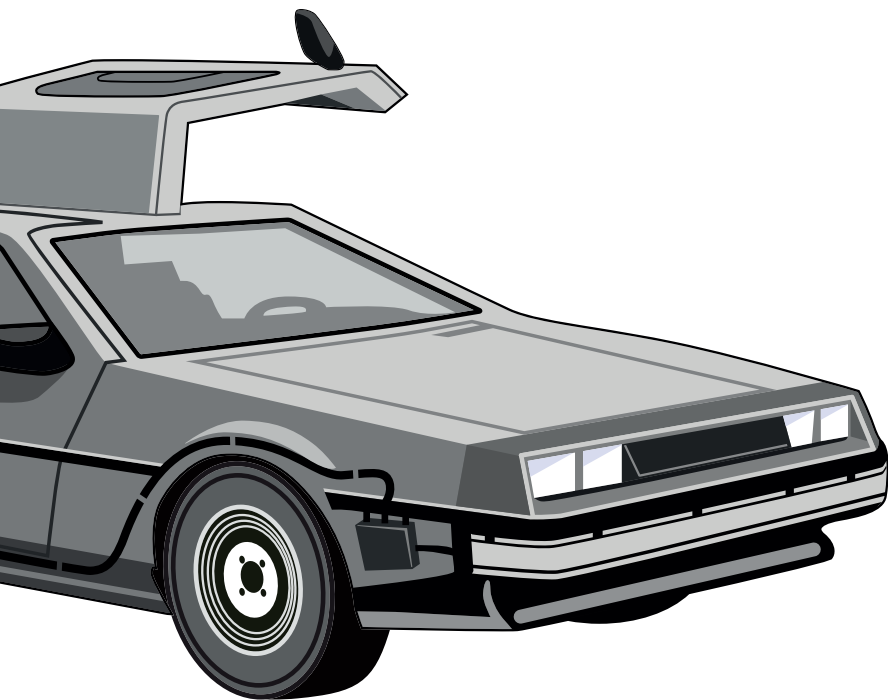


No blueprint to follow? No problem! We do have time-honored basics that work regardless of economic situation. We can grow our inkjet sales regardless of these crazy restrictions by jumping in our collective DeLorean, getting her up to 88 mph, and getting back to the basic sales truths. That's what this White Paper is all about.

Buckle up!

Throw a banana in the Flux Capacitor, and let's go back to the past in order to understand the future.


Bill Farquharson
Kelly Mallozzi



Bottom Feeders & Profit Leaders

Generally speaking, a few decades ago there were two kinds of print companies. One was in the business of “selling print” while the other solved problems. If we had to label them, there’d be *Bottom Feeders* and *Profit Leaders*. The differences between the two were many:

	BOTTOM FEEDERS	PROFIT LEADERS
Sales Motto...	“Need anything printed?”	“Solve the problem, earn the order”
Profitable via...	Volume	Value
Invested in new equipment...	...when their competition bought it.	...when it made sense.
Typical sales pitch...	“Got anything I can quote on?”	“I can serve your business needs.”
Typical customer...	Buys on price, leaves on price.	Buys on ideas and loyalty.



The interesting thing back then, was there was room for both kinds of businesses to exist. A good economy and favorable conditions hides a lot of sales mistakes and vulnerabilities. Business conditions were strong, allowing for all kinds of graphic arts companies to end their year in the black, including those who won and lost business on price.

The profit leaders, on the other hand, had a better sales approach and connected with companies at a different level. Instead of calling on the Buyer, they went for the Decision-Maker. Instead of talking print needs, they talked business needs. As a result, they enjoyed higher returns as well as better and longer-term customer relationships.

As new technology (read: on-demand printing, as it was first known) was introduced to the market, the bottom-feeders embraced it by purchasing multiple devices and changing their marketing message to, “Copies as low as three cents.” The profit leaders, too, entered that market. Their approach was to see this equipment as another tool in the toolbox and continued solving problems, earning orders, and making money – lots of money.

These two sales approaches were a dichotomy that went on for years. Trade magazines were filled with stories of success. Some talked about a company’s vast array of iron on the floor and the volume cranked out each month. It was almost as if entire trees were fed into one side of the building and perfect-bound manuals shipped out the other. Stories of clever and creative applications filled pages, too, as customers grasped the capabilities of digital print equipment and came up with award-winning design solutions never before possible.

And then the roof caved in.

The 2008-2009 housing crisis was a time of reckoning. Suddenly and seemingly overnight, the bandages were ripped off, exposing the warts hidden by a strong economy. Poorly run, poorly financed, debt-heavy printers closed. Only the strong survived. Only those companies with superior selling skills were left. Only printers who had done what was optional remained.

Today, those optional selling activities are mandatory. Of the two types of printers, only one has a future. It's no longer feasible to be a win-on-price vendor and be around for long. That is our lesson. That is what we need to take back with us as we seek to solve today's sales challenges. There is a way, but it is not new. That's good news. We need to focus on the fundamentals of sales and study those profit-leaders from the past. What exactly were those optional activities? Answer that question, follow those lessons, and success follows.

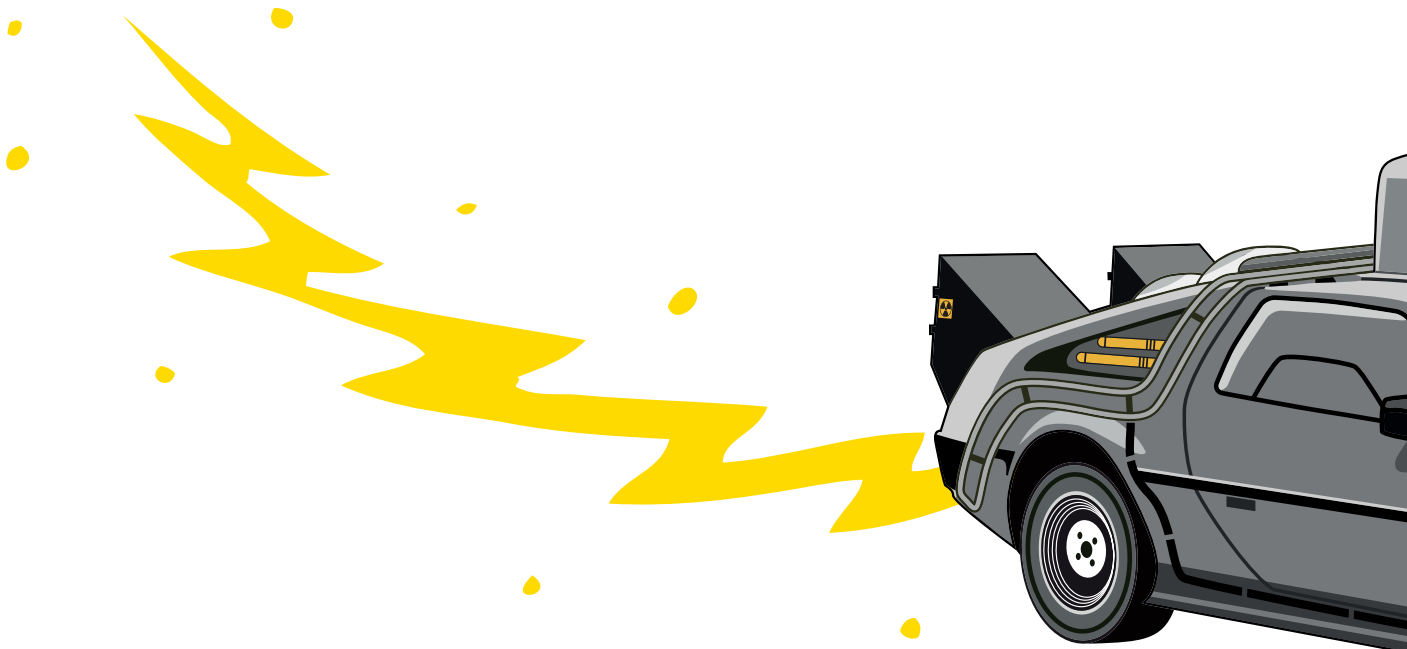
Sales fundamentals from the past can be applied in four aspects of selling inkjet:

1. The Approach | Philosophy and Preparation;
2. Prospecting | Pursuing the appointment;
3. The Sales Call | You got the appointment, NOW what?;
4. Follow-up | Post-appointment activities

Returning to the days of print profitability requires — no, demands — an understanding of how to sell like the old days.

Okay everyone, back in the DeLorean. Let's get back to today and break down each aspect of inkjet sales. The profitability we seek is possible. We just need to create that new sales approach.

Marty. Doc Brown. Hit it!



Meet the New Boss. Same as the Old Boss.

1. THE APPROACH – PHILOSOPHY AND PREPARATION

“Everyone buys on price.”

“There is no customer loyalty anymore.”

“Whichever printer bids the lowest, wins.”

“It has never been this bad and I cannot imagine things getting any worse!”

Sound familiar? Perhaps you, yourself, have uttered these same statements. You might be interested to know these comments are not recent. While they may be completely applicable today, they were spoken in 1982.

The “price” buyers have always been out there and always will be – they were not your customer then and are not your customer now. Leave them to the Bottom-Feeders. You don’t want to get into a price conversation, agree? Of course you do, but you still walk down that dark alley every time you call to speak to the buyer and go on an on about your capabilities in the hopes that he/she gives you a chance.

Every once in a while, lightning strikes and you are tossed a bone. Someone gives you the opportunity to provide pricing. Here’s what the conversation sounds like:

You: “Who buys your print?”

Buyer: “Me.”

You: “Do you have anything I can quote?”

Buyer: “Sure. Give me a price on this.”

You: “Here’s my price.”

Buyer: “Sorry. Your price is too high.”

If you walk down a dark alley late at night, you are going to get mugged. Likewise, if you “sell print,” you are going to get into a price-based conversation, one that you will only win if you have the lowest number (and even then, you will lose that customer to the next salesperson with a sharper pencil than yours).

Think for a second about the conversations you want to get into. What do they sound like? What do you discuss? And most importantly, whom are they with?

If you take the time to actually answer those questions, you will probably say things like:

“I want to talk with decision-makers and document originators.”

“Profitable sales conversations are about solutions, not specs.”

“Let’s have a discussion about your business needs, not your print needs.”

All this brings us to the first “once optional, now mandatory” sales philosophy: “Solve the problem, earn the order.”

In order to sell inkjet printing successfully, it is no longer possible to be anything but a solutions-based salesperson. By learning what the client is trying to do and understanding the story behind the printed piece, the sales rep comes up with a solution and wins the job based on its ability to meet a need.



Different approach. Different outcome.

“Great!” you say; “Agree.” you add; “How?” you ask. Well, that’s where a new old sales skill comes in.

Preparation is key.

In order to solve a company’s problem with the right inkjet print solution, you must put in the time to perform some background research. By understanding the company, market, and direction, you can better envision where you and your inkjet print solutions might fit.

Good pre-call research affects everything from the quality of the pitch — “The purpose of my call is to talk about *something I saw on your website*” — to your contact point — “I see *you are in charge of the new product release* and I would like to show you how I can help with its success”. The planning you’ve done gives your message an edge of confidence which permeates through your voice and helps you gain an appointment.

Back in the day, you didn’t need this kind of approach in order to find success. In reality, even if you wanted to, pre-call research was difficult. We didn’t have the luxury then of a simple google search on the Internet. Information on a company was limited to the business section of a library and whatever you might find in the newspaper. It was, in fact, extraordinary to know something about a company prior to picking up the phone.

Today, there is simply no excuse for not putting in the time to get a cursory view of a website or look up the company’s name to see what pops up. The words, “What does your company do?” should never cross your lips. Instead, you must — MUST — develop the sales muscle that allows you to quickly review publicly available information in order to make the sales call that puts you in the position of solving a problem.

How important is this skill? Let’s put it this way: If you get nothing else from this White Paper, take note of the fact that you need to learn how to research a company before starting any prospecting process.

Other Call-Prep Approaches

Read All About It

Ideas for inkjet printing do not just show up on your doorstep one morning...or do they? Ask a top-shelf sales rep where their best applications come from and they are likely to say some version of, "I'm paying attention and I see them everywhere."

Take the morning paper, for example. The Wall Street Journal had a story in June regarding slow car sales. In July, there was one about how back to school retailers were seeing slow sales. Who cares? You should if your goal is to sell inkjet profitably. How can you help them?

Pay attention!

If pre-call research is an undeveloped muscle group, being "sales-curious" is another. Applications for inkjet printing truly are all around you and yes, they do show up on your doorstep in the form of a newspaper such as the WSJ. You will also find them in your mailbox in the form of solicitations and announcements. Messages are being communicated and you need to train your consumer-self to be on the lookout for sales opportunities.

Think Seasonally

Another thought is to focus on seasonal, "limited time" offerings and do your customers' thinking for them. Consider putting a flyer together aimed at a specific opportunity that comes up once a year. Take the gym membership push around the holidays, for example. Suppose you chose three price points—say \$499, \$749, and \$999—with each one made up of different combinations of print offerings designed to help gyms bolster new sign ups.

The prospecting process is easy:

Step one: Mail the flyer

Step two: Make a follow up phone call

Step three: Actually, that's it. You can call again if you like or leave it there.



The nice thing about this approach is that one year builds on the last. Seasonal opportunities such as auto sales around President's Day, churches' push for new members in the fall, and of course holiday retail sales are perennial, giving you a chance to grow this unique selling process every year.

Before That Repeat Order Repeats

A third "other" idea is simple curiosity. Applications for inkjet printing exist within your current account base and even within your current list of orders. All it takes is a little "what if?" curiosity. It's one thing to know the specs of the job and quite another to know the story behind the printed piece.

Imagine a client calling you up to place a reorder. A good rep takes the information and communicates a price back to the customer, followed by order entry and production. A great rep asks, "How is this piece used?" and then looks for other, better ways to meet the needs of the customer or purpose of the item.

Remember, the number one reason we lose an account isn't because they went and found a price

better than yours. It's because they were dissatisfied enough to seek one in the first place. Had you taken the time to re-solve the problem and provide alternative solutions, you say to the customer, "I am still working for your business." Remind the client why they buy from you and there will be no need to seek an alternate vendor.

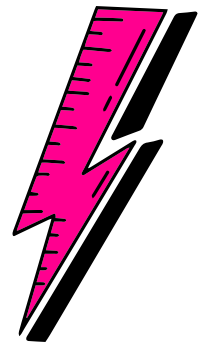
Be a Vertical Subject Matter Expert (SME)

Vertical markets, such as banks, colleges, hospitals and other industries or companies in similar fields, offer the opportunity to learn a lot about one kind of business, get to know their business (and therefore their business needs), and focus your selling attention in one place. Solve a problem with an inkjet solution for one bank and you'll find another bank with the same need. Each sale gets easier as you learn the questions to ask and know the answers even before they respond.

Imagine being a subject matter expert (SME) and using your marketing engine to get the word out. When a call comes in, you are immediately recognized for your prowess in their world. Wait, did you hear that? That was the sound of the price objection going silent.

The money to be made in inkjet printing (or any solutions-based sale, for that matter) comes from selling at the highest levels of a company. Here, you will avoid a hyper-focus on price while working with someone who has the power to select a vendor and dictate their choice to Purchasing.

Effective sales conversations get their start from many sources. None of them are born from a "can I quote on something?" approach. The new old sales skill involves initiating ideas and creating opportunities that did not exist before you thought them up. This approach becomes second nature in time. As the sales muscle develops, you'll find yourself thinking a new way. And that's the idea!



2. PROSPECTING | PURSUING THE APPOINTMENT

Reviewing the lessons from one of our earlier White Papers, selling inkjet printing requires a high-value message/pitch, the right target market, a process to follow, and diligence. So far, we've discussed the first two (although we recommend you back the truck up and reread what we've written and posted on THINK Forum previously). Let's talk process next and any new old sales techniques to know and apply.

There are two things in life you can count on over time: a Craftsman screwdriver and a step-by-step, week-by-week prospecting process. Both last for decades. An effective prospecting process, both then and now, has no special components. It starts with making a first impression. There are follow up steps. Finally, there is an end. Other than adding some new communication options, such as email or text, you can reach for your screwdriver or your prospecting process and be certain it'll work for you.

90% of all print salespeople have no prospecting process. That should surprise 10% of you reading this White Paper. To the other 90%, while you are in good company in terms of numbers, remember what your mother used to say: You are judged by the company you keep. You need to start hanging out with different people; people who have a plan. Sit with a pad of paper and come up with different activities over a four week period. Try it for a few weeks and then make some tweaks.

While the plan you put together to sell inkjet printing does not need a facelift, the technology itself adds an interesting element, one that affords you a new old opportunity.

If you describe a printing press in its most basic terms, you'd say something like this:

"It's beige and uses electricity."

<<Yawn>>

But if you took a different approach, an anecdotal approach, it would sound completely different:

"Imagine being able to connect with customers and prospects on an individual level based on their preferences and interests."

One description invokes a picture of iron, as bland as a November day. The other adds color and the imagination explodes with possibilities. No one cares about the equipment you have on the floor. They care about what it can do for them. This needs to be in the back of your mind as you first work to gain the appointment and then again when you are at the appointment. More on this in the next section.

Armed with a new way of thinking, you set out to make appointments to sell inkjet. The quality of your call is high, thanks to the lesson on research. You've got a good idea of where to focus your prospecting energy thanks to the Vertical Markets White Paper you read on thINKforum.com (um, you did read that one, right?). You even have a prospecting process (multi-step, multi-week). All that's left is to engage. For many sales people, this is the hardest part, for reasons both internal and external.

The chief difference here comes down to the fact that we sales people no longer enjoy easy access to the powers-that-be. Partially due to technology (Caller ID, Voice Mail) and partially due to the COVID-19 employee scatter, even making contact with a client is a challenge. This means we need to use a heretofore untapped personal power: Optimism.

First, the sales rep must believe. Armed with an internal selling attitude of confidence that walks right up to (but never crosses) the "cocky" line, the customer hears the sales pitch but also the confidence with which it is delivered. In short, be someone you'd want to do business with.

Second, the sales rep must communicate that confidence and speak as though the appointment sought is already in hand. Attitude really is everything.

In both cases, optimism is a must. Is this new? No. However, given the difficulty involved with obtaining a meeting, every little bit helps.

Make the Calls. Repeat. Make the Calls.

The final piece to the prospecting puzzle is diligence. A pleasantly persistent sales rep



can overcome shortcomings in the other three areas (message, target, process). And while diligence in the form of making repeated attempts to connect with a prospect was important in the past, it is a critical part of differentiation today.

Wait, differentiation? Hold up, Bill and Kelly. Are you telling me I can separate my inkjet-capable company from the pack simply by making multiple calls on the same prospect? You're going to need to explain that one.

Okay...

Bill (standing in front of a live audience of printers and sales people): "Owners and managers in the room, what percent of the time does an outside rep call on you, leave a message, and never call again?"

Consistent collective answer: "90%"

By making a second attempt; by leaving a second message, you have done something 90% of your competition has failed to do. And a third call? OMG that's unheard of.

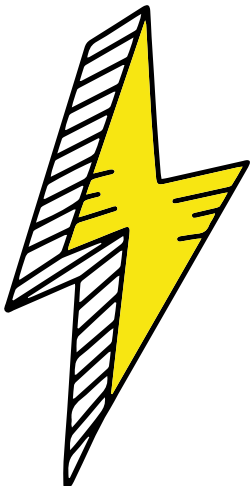
And that's why you need to do it.

So, there. Congratulations. You have successfully secured an appointment. This is the opportunity you've worked so hard for and finally, the work is done...

...or is it?

3. THE SALES CALL | YOU GOT THE APPOINTMENT...NOW WHAT?

Today, earning an appointment is akin to winning the lottery or being the lucky radio station caller who gets Springsteen tickets. You absolutely **MUST** make the most of the time by thinking through the call and preparing every point; every minute.



What does the client need to know about inkjet?

What samples should you bring?

What information do you need to have on the company, the industry, and the people you are meeting with?

How will the call start?

What is the purpose?

What is the next step after this meeting?

Fully 90% of your success in that rare meeting comes before you even step into the conference room.

It's how you prepare that makes or breaks the call. Get it right and you win a second appointment. Fail to take this once-optional-now-mandatory step and hyper-prepare and you'll have worked hard for nothing.

Treat every appointment with a prospect like a once-in-a-lifetime sit down with <<insert your hero here>>.

During the meeting, remember the inkjet sale is visual. Show samples where you know the backstory and can relate the before and after details. Paint the picture. Use color. Unleash the creativity in the minds of your prospects and customers.



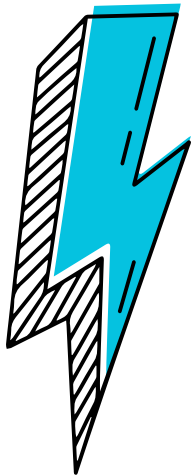
Inkjet printing is a cure. Go find what it fixes.

One final thought

Do you remember office hours back in college? Professors would set aside time each week for students to drop by and discuss the lectures or ask questions about the course material. They made themselves available.

Buyers did this as well. It was fairly common for the non-incumbent vendor to have the chance to offer up new ideas or show off their wares. The thinking was simple: "We don't know what we don't know. Perhaps there is a better way. Let's find out."

Ah, the good old days, back when people were open to new ideas. We sure miss them.



4. FOLLOW-UP | POST-APPOINTMENT ACTIVITIES

It was your birthday and presents were piled up on the table. After all of the tearing and shouting and excitement; once the cake was gone and along with it the guests, your Mom turned to you and said, "Let's get those thank-you notes started." You no doubt groaned your little kid groan, but you obeyed and got the long process of ensuring future gifting underway.

When is the last time you received a thank-you note? And do you recall what you said on that rare occasion? Do you remember how you felt about the person who sent it to you? Exactly. It's such a simple act, but no one does it anymore. And that's why you should. At bare minimum, send an email. But to really make an impression, hand write it and stick it in the mail. That's old school, baby!

Additionally, engage in a practice that is not necessarily old, but certainly a new standard: Amazon-level communication. Amazon is the gold standard for customer information when it comes to orders in house. Seriously, anything you want to know about that ugly shirt you ordered for some unknown reason can be found online. Some information comes in the form of an email while the rest is a click or two away. You need to achieve that level of communication. Is it fair? No. But it's their world and their rules.

Summary

Regardless of the selling conditions, be it economic or global health, what it takes to grow inkjet print sales in graphic arts remains the same:



- Choose the right target market(s) to call on;
- Have something of value to say;
- Create a step by step process;
- Apply that process with diligence.

“Back in the day” print was sold profitably by following those four steps and that same process works today as well in the specialty worlds of digital and inkjet. Oh, and it will work tomorrow. And next year, too. And the year after that. It’s how you sell print. It’s how you sell digital print. It’s how you sell inkjet printing. It’s how you sell.

There are certain events in life where a line is drawn and references are made in terms of before and after this event. Having kids, for example. The same can be said for COVID-19. This period in history will serve as a time wall of sorts, separating for billions of people life before and life after (not to mention life during). We will tell stories of the way things were before the world shut down. We will talk about how things have changed, some for the better and some for the worse. But all of it will be measured with this defining event in the middle.

For the graphic arts sales rep, “before” sales challenges were many:

- No one answered the phone;
- Voicemail messages went unanswered;
- Customer loyalty was deteriorating;
- Our products and services were seen as homogeneous, and more.

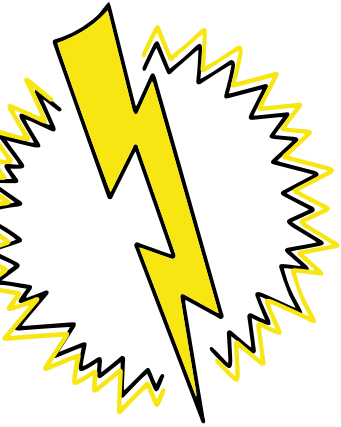
Had a prediction been made that these obstacles would be fondly remembered and sorely missed, the prognosticator’s sanity and mental health would surely have been questioned. However, that is precisely what has happened.

If only...

- ...our biggest challenge was unanswered calls.
- ...voicemail was a primary sales inhibitor.
- ...those increasingly disloyal customers were still around to despise.
- ...the lack of differentiation was what is keeping us from selling more.

Fortunately, we have a trusty Craftsman screwdriver in our toolbox and a proven prospecting process to follow. We have lessons from those who sold before us to show us what worked. And we have the resilience to get up off of the canvas and stay in the fight. Life changed faster than you can say, “Yo, Adrienne,” and suddenly we found ourselves in a world where very little made sense and changed with every heartbeat.

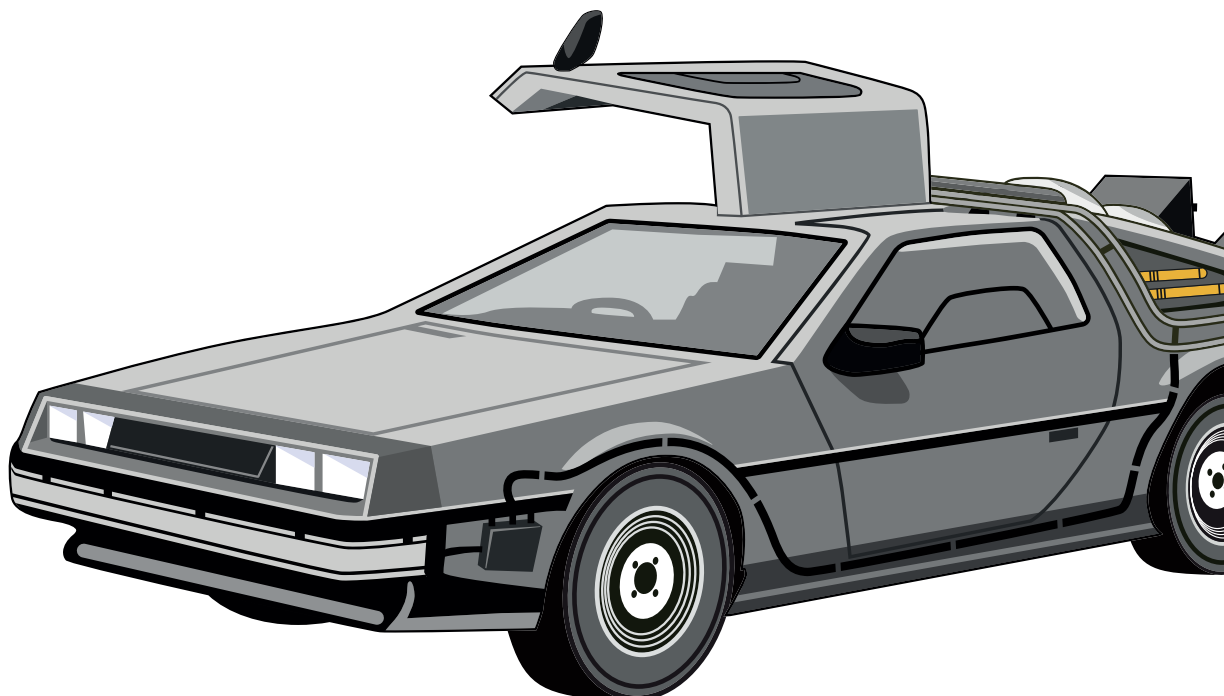
Early in the pandemic, the rules changed every 24 hours. Then, it was a week at a time. Now that we are all experienced quarantine-ers, we can rewrite the rulebook according to the new set of circumstances. But there is no need to start from scratch. Instead, start with what has always worked and make adjustments from there.



- *Change your mindset from “I sell print” to “I solve problems;” from “We can save you money” to “We can grow your business;” from “We can get you the lowest price” to “We help our customers find their customers.”*
- *Put in the time to prepare for that sales call.*
- *Make the most of every selling opportunity by doubling down on your research and thinking every step of the call through.*
- *Raise your communication level to today’s high standards.*

The DeLorean is always on standby if you need to visit the past. Just know you don’t need to go back to the future to learn a fundamental truth: Fundamentals don’t change!

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Bill's passion for the industry and love of learning comes through with every live presentation, every Printing Impressions column, every PIWorld.com blog, and every Short Attention Span Sales Tip. Each is full of new ideas for solving old sales challenges, not to mention a lot of fun to sit through or read! His is a fundamental message: Make a high-value, well-researched sales call on the right target market using a prospecting process applied with diligence and success is inevitable. Follow that formula and he'll guarantee sales growth, a promise he makes and keeps to all of his training clients.

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