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Just a thought ... Where have all the sales reps gone?

Tuesday, 18 June 2013

By Print21

James Cryer explores three possible sources for small-business owners trying to find a sales rep.

Like small creatures that go into hibernation, we could be forgiven for assuming that some natural event has caused a sudden mass disappearance of one of those already endangered species, the *printus repii*. Hounded, abused, under-nourished, this species has hung on for grim death for decades, as its familiar pastures have shrunk and many of its familiar watering holes have disappeared.

Today *printus repii* is a mere shadow of its former robust self, as the rich harvest it used to feed on has been engulfed by that noxious weed, digitalis. Gone are the days when you'd be knocked over in the rush anytime you wished to whistle-up a rep. It's hard enough to actually find one – let alone one who wants to make cold calls all day long.

So let's face it – reps are an endangered species, like butlers and au pair girls. You just can't get a good one, anymore. As times get tougher, so bosses' tempers get worse and their patience wears even thinner. It used to be reasonable for a rep to take six to twelve months to build up a good head of steam. Now it's down to months and counting.

The other problem is, there's not much in the way of a point of difference between one printing company and the next. So reps are in mortal fear of flogging a product that everyone else has and there'll always be someone who can flog it cheaper!

So who'd be a print rep?

That's the problem – but what's the solution?

Just occasionally, the company's best sales rep is right under your nose. You may say 'Hello' to her everyday without realising. It's the receptionist!

Think about it: (I'm generalising that the most receptionists are female, so please forgive me, any bloke receptionists) –

- she's got a bright, breezy personality,
- she probably knows – by name – most of your clients better than you
- she's got a pretty good idea of what you make! (If not you should fire yourself as the world's worst boss for not informing all your staff of what your company does)
- she's been trained (by you, of course) to be diligent in getting back to clients who require information, and
- Am I allowed to say she's probably better looking than you?

OK. So you don't like my receptionist theory. Well, you've got another guy (we've got to keep the gender balance even) lurking there somewhere on your payroll. Again, if you go down into the factory every day (as I'm sure you do), you'd recall there's a really switched-on young operator who's always quick to say "Hi!" and who always seems to love greeting agencies, especially when they send young female print buyers to do the press-checks!

So what's he got going for himself as a potential sales rep?

- being a rep is an aspirational thing. Males have terrible egos, and so it's something he'd die for to tell his mates that he's now a *BDM*, not just a press-operator. There's no better incentive, than by impressing his peer group to make sure he succeeds with your support.

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Starleaton expands with Zund agency takeover | Print21 Ben Eaton is on the takeover track. <http://t.co/GRtavWVg6C> via @sharethis

Joan Grace quits Printing Industries & Future Print –

- he has an excellent understanding of printing processes and their capabilities and so can talk intelligently to clients about their print needs,
- he's a known quantity, you know him and he knows you. Now if you've been a lousy boss this may come back to bite you, but for the purpose, we'll assume you're like all print industry bosses – perfect.

Let's take a brief breather. You might not like either of these options. You say the receptionist has no technical skills and the printer doesn't know how to generate new business.

Fine. This is the people business and that's what you're there for, to guide, support and mentor, to work on their weaknesses and build on their strengths. That's what good managers do, or are supposed to. This is no longer a game of maximizing – there is no perfect rep out there (Well, there is, but I'm otherwise engaged). This is a game of optimising – trying to build on the people we've got, not imagining there is some legendary sales rep out there, who will miraculously answer all your hopes and dreams.

Seriously – you still don't like my idea. What's the alternative? You hire a rep for a small fortune, who brings in very little (that's not always his/her fault of course!) and who promised to bring all sorts of clients onboard. He/she has a dummy-spit several months later, leaving you the worse for wear, and back to square one.

One other employee may yet come to the rescue

You! That's right, you! Think about it: wouldn't you rather be out there talking to clients about their corporate communication needs, than getting bogged down in boring admin stuff? We seem to suffer from this Calvinist work ethic that the boss must slave away in the office or down in the factory as if being in those places is an attempt to expiate one's sins.

Now this proposition – that you get out and sell – is based on the assumption that you're a relatively new age kind of guy, not some grumpy old curmudgeon. Thankfully, most bosses I've met fall into the first category and thus have all the bells and whistles to be a good sales rep. Sadly in this country, sales reps have often been regarded as second class citizens whereas in the US they're regarded as professionals, who can often earn more than the boss.

Yes, I know you are the boss, but potentially, you could deliver more revenue to the business than any hired gun. All you've got to do is surround yourself with people who are smarter than you. What's that you say? They are! OK, well you're halfway there.

You know what you have to do now? Surround yourself with people you can trust, and you're ready to start re-writing the record books. Maybe have some fun and possibly meet lots of new people. Those new people are likely your old clients that you've never met before!

You've just learnt your first lesson about your own business, and the potentially perilous link it has with its customers.

And there's one other benefit: all the long lunches are legal.

James Cryer is director of [JDA Print Recruitment](#)

The industry can't afford to lose talent such as Joan Grace
[.http://ft.co/DuGDpXtwbC](http://ft.co/DuGDpXtwbC)

Colin Longbottom heads towards the exit Good man Colin, hope your saddlebags are well loaded for the sunset ride.<http://ft.co/d5oamorf2X>

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8 Responses to “Just a thought ... Where have all the sales reps gone?”

1. June 18, 2013 at 4:54 pm, **dave** said:

Have a question who owns the business that the rep brings in, the rep or the company that pays the rep wages/commision.

2. June 18, 2013 at 10:46 pm, Cellmen said:

The guy who wrote this has double standards..

3. June 19, 2013 at 8:51 am, **Bob** said:

ummm..... "not just a press-operator." ?????

Just? Want a ladder to get down off that high horse?

4. June 19, 2013 at 9:47 am, David Cooke - Konica Minolta said:

There is an organisation called ProGrad who take young uni grads and screen them for sales competencies and then link them with companies looking for salespeople. Worth talking to them.

5. June 19, 2013 at 10:37 am, **Mark** said:

Great article James! Where have all the sales reps gone....?

Firstly, during the GFC reps were seen as expendable and the first heads to get the chop. Common believe was / is you don't have to build anything, just buy a portfolio of clients by hiring an experienced rep. Next, add the credibility gap that was created by firstly asking them to continuously rubbish digital and then be born again with the coming of the inevitable! Finally you are absolutely right; there are very few points of difference. Why would anyone want to go out and flog more and more of the same for less and less!

6. June 19, 2013 at 10:53 am, **Neil Bown** said:

The best reps are grown & developed through the business over time, there is a sales plan, training & career path & yes James this is something to aspire to & attracts quality people, our industry stopped doing this years ago & tried to take an 'easy' option & so here we are, todays actions equal tomorrows results.

Neil Bown.

7. June 19, 2013 at 11:59 am, **Paul Murphy** said:

I have tried my hand at sales in printing and found it too difficult in a time when digital was coming in and offset printing volumes are in decline. The main problem is if you are applying for sales jobs the prospective employer wants you to come with the last printers clients. Not really a good idea if you concerned about having a good reputation. The internet and desktop printing is also taking a large piece of a printers pie and finally, the last deterrent is the GFC which created less work for printers in an environment that already has a low margin sales scenario.

8. June 19, 2013 at 1:00 pm, **Damien** said:

As a BDM who sold print i can answer that most good reps selling print have moved on or are well down the path of moving on as they get sick and tired of print companies not paying commissions when they had been fairly earned. Commissions are often seen as the first thing to cut when a company falls on hard time but they forget that makes up a significant portion of a reps pay packet as sorry but we dont come to work of the love of it we, BDM's are motivated by the hunt and the reward at the end of a good hunt is commission. like it or loath it if you kill a BDM's motivation you will kill your business.

Print is a declining industry, the good reps are leaving, to more lucrative industries that can offer some thing different something new to the market, and something they are going to get paid for.

Just my two cents

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