Webology, Volume 18, Number 1, 2021
ISSN: 1735-188X
DOI: 10.29121/WEB/V18I1/37

Readying our business for growth

Richa Thapliyal, HSS[1], Vjay Paul, HSS[2], Dr. Mandakini Sharma[3]

[1]Graphic Era Deemed to Be University, Dehradun Vjay Paul, HSS,
[2]Graphic Era Deemed to Be University, Dehradun
[3]Associate Professor, Department of Visual Arts, Graphic Era Hill University, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India

ABSTRACT

Having built my career within Retail Management and Project Management, I moved into sales at 31 years old, a late age compared to most of my peers. Having now been selling complex sales successfully for eight years entirely within the print industry, I am fascinated with the assertion that "only 10% of salespeople really get it" (Squire 2009).

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

Having built my career within Retail Management and Project Management, I moved into sales at 31 years old, a late age compared to most of my peers. Having now been selling complex sales successfully for eight years entirely within the print industry, I am fascinated with the assertion that "only 10% of salespeople really get it" (Squire 2009).

This statement resonates with me because I believe the printing industry absolutely needs to transform itself to keep pace with change, and my experience suggests the transformation is hindered by precedent, tradition and outdated mindsets, with a selling model which frequently reverts to a product centric approach, rather than selling solutions which truly deliversvalue.

Why does this happen? Manufacturers are driven by volume sales of hardware to support aftermarket revenues. Often they measure their success based on their market share in respect of Machines in Field (MIF). Machine sales are easy to quantify, and re-sellers are invariably incentivised on targets linked to device placement. This is the tradition within the print industry and as a result, the focus within both manufacturers and re-sellers is simply to sell more hardware; the net result often being a commoditised sale.

I believe Dixon and Adamson's (2011: 7) research across multiple verticals, where they found "A full 75% of respondents have aspirations to be solutions providers", is equally valid within the print industry (if not more so), the problem being that many providers appear unwilling to, or don't know how to affect change to achieve this. As Morgen (2009: xiv) says: "…unless all the pieces of your system buy into adding new ideas and skills, and are prepared to go through an uncomfortable

Webology, Volume 18, Number 1, 2021
ISSN: 1735-188X
DOI: 10.29121/WEB/V18I1/37

process of change, you will not change."

This was a key driver behind the formation of our company, XYZ Print Ltd. Unwittingly, the process around the formation of the business bears a striking resemblance to the Appreciative Inquiry 4D Cycle (Cooperrider, Whitney 2005: 15). Although we were not aware of AI or the specific methodology at the time XYZ Print Ltd was formed, the process was remarkablysimilar:

- *Discovery* – Collectively we appreciated what our values are and what we are good at as a team, and recognised the difficulties in living our values whilst working for our previous employers, who's own business values were consistent with the industry problems highlighted on the previous page;
- *Dream* – Could we strike out on our own? What could that look like, a business which focuses specifically on complex sales and sustainable partnerships with clients?
- *Design* – Putting the foundations in place e.g. defining theroute to market, manufacturer support and investors;
- *Destiny* – XYZ Print Ltdwas born.

What is my concern?
In order to remain successful and achieve our business objectives, we need to constantly differentiate XYZ Print Ltd against the competition. A fundamental part of this relies upon the people within the organisation, so a logical place to begin my inquiry was with a critical analysis of myself in the sales environment.

The core of my inquiry was to ask the following questions:

- Do I demonstrateoutstanding/differentiating mindsets?
- If not, what do I need to change?
- Even if I demonstrate outstanding mindsets, how can I improve my practice further?

Why am I concerned?
Based upon experience having worked for twonational print providers, one of my main concerns has always revolved around the subject of supplier centricity. Marketing messages and stated values were based upon a customer centric approach, but in practice the values demonstrated actually reflected the opposite. In both businesses, the "immediate deal" was the only thing that mattered, and this message ultimately defined the behaviour of the sales teams.

This is an area where I want XYZ Print Ltd to be different, which leads to the question of: what are my values and those of our business?

The valuesare:

- *To be customer centric*, through fostering long term partnerships, based on mutual "win-win" rather than focusing exclusively on the short term supplier centric "win";
- *To be creative*, through developing strategic solutions which go beyond competitor's offerings, driving value for both supplier and customer;
- *To be credible and challenging,* through delivering insight into "the art of the possible" and positively questioning working practices within customers;

Webology, Volume 18, Number 1, 2021
ISSN: 1735-188X
DOI: 10.29121/WEB/V18I1/37

- *To cultivate mutual trust and honesty*, through beingethical, dependable and transparent.

Note that in respect of "customer centricity," I mean *balanced centricity* (Baker, Hart 2008: 469), as I believe there is an inherent conflict in taking customer centricity so literally.

Understanding my values is key, because I don't believe I can expect our business ethos to reflect these values, if I myself don't demonstrate this behaviour and "live"them.

I believe there are also incremental benefits to ensuring I am personally living our core values, as McNiff (2010: 46) states: "If you can improve what you are doing, there is a good chance that you can influence the thinking of the other people you are working with."

The situation as it is

Using both Action Research and Appreciative Inquiry methodologies, I planned to:

1. Conduct a Johari Window exercise (Luft, Ingham 1955) for peers and friends/family, to understand thevalues which drives my practice;
2. Interview a current customer to gain a critical understanding of how they perceive me in a selling role;
3. Self-reflection on my current practice, mindsets and performance;
4. Recommended course reading and other texts.

Research– Johari Window

In order to better understand my values and whether I am living them, I conducted a voluntary Johari Window exercise(Luft, Ingham 1955), targeting peers, friends and family. I included friends and family as the findings should be equally valid within the context of the workplace, especially given the theory of the Iceberg Model of Behaviour & Values (Consalia Module 1), that our behaviour is reflective of our personal values and beliefs.

One of the key valuesselected by several respondents was *trustworthy*, and this theme was replicated across all of my third party research. This is important to me, as I believe trust is a fundamental requirement for forming long term strategic relationships with customers.

Other common valuesselected included*able, confident* and *helpful.* More interesting from an action research perspective, however, were values such as *observant* and *searching.*These descriptions fit within Squire's Client Centricity mindset, as well as Sir Clive Woodward's analogy of "Sponges and Rocks" (2013), where he suggests that people in high performing teams should be sponges – i.e. they have not just the ability but crucially thedesire to absorb and learn. I believe this contributes to my success, as I continue to embrace learning.

Another attribute of note from this exercise, was *reflective.* I am a naturally reflective person, and whilst not a direct attribute of the Differentiating Mindsets, I believe this does help me analyse and learn from experiences. One of the significant benefits of my learning so far is that I now understand the tools to allow me to structure my reflection (e.g. Gibbs Reflective Cycle, 5 Why Analysis), making the process and outcomes more defined.

Webology, Volume 18, Number 1, 2021
ISSN: 1735-188X
DOI: 10.29121/WEB/V18I1/37

I was not surprised by the feedback I received in this exercise; rather, it re-affirmed some of my personal beliefs and values, and understanding of myself.

Research– Customer interview

I conducted a face to face interview with a current customer, a national charity retailer with whom I have been working for the last nine months. In the interview, which the customer allowed me to record, I asked several questions based around their decision to choose XYZ Print Ltd as their partner of choice.

My questions were open and consistent with the core ethos of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, Witney 2005: 7), which is to say, the questions focused on the customer's experiences with XYZ Print Ltd, in order to gain insight into how I am perceived by them, and also how XYZ Print Ltd might improve.

The responses were positive and echoed our organisational objectives: "…the other providers could provide the technology and service, and knew their products very well…butyou went beyond the physical equipment to understand the end user experience – it's made the difference between a product and a package."

This point echoes Dixon and Adamson (2011: 6), who state that "The key to success is the creation of bundled offerings that not only meet broader customer needs in a unique and valuable way, but also that competitors can't easily replicate."

In this particular case, the competition *could* have replicated our physical and commercial offering, but my *approach* to the engagement was different, because I was already looking ahead and highlighting other projects where efficiencies could be improved – in short, I delivered a *teaching* message (Dixon and Adamson 2011).

The customer also made several powerful statements which perfectly captures our company values:

- "XYZ Print Ltd is deeply embedded in how we *could* do things."
- "You show us the art of the possible."
- "We're so busy doing what we deliver, sometimes we forget to stop…You guide us and open our eyes a little bit."

These statements echoesDixon and Adamson's view on delivering insight (2011: 53): "The best companies don't win through the quality of the products they sell, but through the quality of the insight they deliver as part of the sale itself. The battle for customer loyalty is won or lost long before a thing ever gets sold. And the best reps win that battle not by 'discovering' what customers already know they need, but by teaching them a new way of thinking altogether."

Whilst this was great feedback to receive, it was at this stage during the interview that I made a mistake, whereby I addedmy own view to these customer statements. Although I didn't interrupt, I was clearly listening autobiographically (Covey 2004: 245) and imparting my own values and opinions on a piece of research which should be based purely on the customer's perception. After

Webology, Volume 18, Number 1, 2021
ISSN: 1735-188X
DOI: 10.29121/WEB/V18I1/37

some rapid reflecting in action, I quickly finished my point and made no further value based commentsduring the interview.

The final part of the interview focused upon me as an individual, where I presented the customer with twenty statements describing various behaviours. The statements were positive in line with AI practices, and they were based on the "Five Sales Rep Profiles" contained within The Challenger Sale (Dixon, Adamson 2011). I chose this particular menu of attributes because I wanted to understand which profile I fell within, according to the CEB research.

The key statements selected by the customer were:

- Genuine;
- Understands the customer's business;
- Can work with anyone;
- Willing to go the extra mile; and
- Builds advocates within the customer's business;

The trend of "trust" and *authenticity*came out as the dominantdescription, but all of the points above reflect Squire's Differentiating Mindsets. In relation to the "Five Sales Rep Profiles", only one of them is a "challenger" statement. This confirms my opinion that I disagree with one of the principles of Dixon and Adamson's writing, in that all sales people are effectively "pigeon holed" by one of the five behaviour profiles. It is my belief that depending on both the situation and the customer involved, good salespeople move across *all* of the five profiles, and to varying degrees. Sometimes we need to challenge, sometimes we need to "go that extra mile", but none of the profiles are mutually exclusive.

Critical feedback

The research also uncovered something ofwhich I was previously unaware. Although the customer highlighted "willing to go the extra mile" as a strength, he also stated it could be viewed in a critical way. In the context of negotiating a contract with the Charity, the customer stated they thought I perhaps "gave away too much" and could have "pushed back" on them, which wouldn't have compromised the contract or harmed the relationship.

Research– Personal Reflection on my inquiry

The core question of my inquirywas: Do I demonstrate outstanding/differentiating mindsets that puts me in Squire's "10%"?

I believe the answer is yes; but only *sometimes*.

All of the third party research has highlighted that I demonstrate aspects of Squire's Differentiating Mindsets. The customer's feedback confirms that XYZ Print Ltd as a business is achieving what we set out to do; I have achieved *differentiating* XYZ Print Ltdwithin this customer through the sales approach, which encompassesall of the outstanding mindsets. Particularly as the relationship has developed, I have showed them a different way to look at specific problems, challenged the way they work, and constructed a solid win-win proposition which resulted in a large contract being signed, with no benchmarking and no vendors to compete against.

Webology, Volume 18, Number 1, 2021
ISSN: 1735-188X
DOI: 10.29121/WEB/V18I1/37

There is, however, room for improvement. After taking the customer's critical feedback back to my peers, they agreed that sometimes I could be stronger with customers. I conducted a 5 Why Analysis on this feedback, and discovered the root cause was an experience some years back where I had been awarded a contract, but then lost it to a competitor before the deal was signed.

As a result I'm sometimes paranoid a win could be "lost" and will remove every objection possible, even if it's not necessarily in the best interest of the business.This is a minor but valuable point to take action on.

Reflecting further, I found that sometimes I can be guilty of being too eager to please, particularly where I've already established good relationships, because I want to be seen as valuable to my customers. I need to question myself more in the future, and have a clear internal response to: "What value is this adding to the relationship, and what value is this adding to XYZ Print Ltd?"

Demonstrating outstanding mindsets – *sometimes*?

Jean McNiff says of action research (2010: 34): "It is critical and risky. Improving one's thinking in order to improve one's practices involves questioning what we think is the case, and possibly changing our position in light of greater honesty. This can be uncomfortable, and often requires considerable courage."

Whilst I don't believe analysing my research has required me to be courageous, in some ways it has been uncomfortable. Despite the customer and peer behaviour exercise focusing on and confirming positive values and attitudes, reflecting personally on action can only lead me to conclude that I demonstrate differentiating mindsets mostly, but not all of the time.

Why is this? Historically I have found that if the customer's mindset is mainly commodity based and they don't value a partnership approach, or if I can't see a sizeable opportunity to develop, then I don't necessarily make the same efforts I would otherwise. In these circumstances, if I were to be persistent in seeking to demonstrate these differentiating mindsets, perhaps I could uncover opportunities that I'd not previously spotted? Or positively influence a customer's approach?In both cases there is the potential to win more business.

A lesson in listening

One of the most significant discoveries from my research was gained from recommended reading. As well as Covey's explanation of "emphatic listening" (2004: 239), Nancy Kline's "Time to Think" contained some valuable insights for me (1999: 37): "We think we listen, but we don't. We finish each other's sentences, we interrupt each other…we fill in the pauses with our own stories…" I found the above to be absolutely true of myself, and on reflection I am guilty of all of these things, particularly "tailgating" (Kline 1999: 42). I do this occasionally with customers and colleagues alike, and experienced this in a recent introductory meeting with a prospective customer.

Afterwards, I applied the Gibbs Reflective Cycle to this situation, as follows:

- Description: On two occasions I finished a customer's sentence for them;
- Feelings/thoughts: Embarrassed when I got one of them wrong;

Webology, Volume 18, Number 1, 2021
ISSN: 1735-188X
DOI: 10.29121/WEB/V18I1/37

- Evaluation: Overall the meeting went well, however on reflection it was rude of me to interrupt. The fact that I jumped in to finish a sentence means that I wasn't listening properly, which is a critical failing;
- Analysis: I did this to demonstrate credibility to the customer, by trying to be "one step ahead" of them;
- Conclusion and Action Plan: Make one or two credibility building statements at the beginning of introductory meetings, and remember the entire sales approach builds credibility!

Another key example of where listening skills can be improved is within internal meetings, where I occasionally interrupt other people when they are talking. When I do this I am typically thinking of what point I want to get across, rather than truly listening to what they are saying, which has an important implication, as Kline (1999: 17) states: "Our thinking depends on the quality of our *attention* for each other."

The lesson there is to endeavour to respect other people more, and try to operate with the "thinking environment" (Kline 1999) in the forefront of my mind.

Modifying my practice
Key practice changes include:

1. **Listening**. A work in progress. I continue to fall into the traps, however I consciously try to listen more and operate by the rules of the positive thinking environment. Not tailgating, waiting for people to finish speaking and reflecting in action when I do slip into bad habits, are becoming conscious behaviour, and I will continue to work on this. I believe this will provide a solid baseline to work from, particularly as the business expands and I have people reporting directly to me.
2. **Changing the language**. The learning to date – particularly attributes of Squire's Differentiating Mindsets (2009) and insights from The Challenger Sale (Dixon, Adamson 2011) – have been applied both in new customer prospecting and introductory appointments. Both verbally and in writing, I now talk about "delivering insight" rather than "I want to understand your challenges"; I talk about "Changing the way you look at a problem", rather than "I can help you with that problem". And I use the phrase "showing you the Art of the Possible" even more than I used to.

In light of the timescales involved in the delivery of this project, other practice changes have not been possible to implement and test yet, however those changes are:

1. **Question the value.** In situations where there are time or commercial demands made by customers, I will reflect in action more, to understand and make a judgement on:
    a. Is this a reasonable request?
    b. Is this going to add value to the relationship?
    c. Is this going to add value to our business?
2. **Push every opportunity with the correct mindset.** Even if a customer has a transactional approach and the opportunity appears small, I will actively demonstrate the mindsets which

are present in my "premium" customers, in order to maximise business opportunities and live my values.

Conclusion and significance of my research

To go back to the original assertion made by a customer in Philip Squire's research that "only 10% of salespeople really get it", I can honestly say I believe I *do* "get it", but I demonstrate this behaviour only *some of the time.*

So what?

The main outcome of my research has been to raise the awareness of my behaviour, and to make my actions more conscious. The improvements in my practice may be small, but long term the impact could be significant as our team grows, particularly because my behaviour will influence others.

Speaking of influence, I have shared my learning with colleagues, and particularly around listening skills, they have reported more awareness of this themselves, to the extent that interrupting and tailgating are frequently highlighted in our team meetings now.

Ultimately there is no fixed conclusion to my findings, because action research is ongoing, and a living theory is exactly that – a living, evolving thing:

"The point is not to look for a happy ending or solution, because there is no such thing. Life is ongoing, and the end of one thing becomes the starting point for another."
McNiff (2010: 35)

References:

1. Baker, M J., Hart S J. (2008) *The Marketing Book Sixth Edition.* Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
2. Cooperrider, D., Whitney, D. (2005) *Appreciative Inquiry – A Positive Revolution in Change.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
3. Covey, S. (1989, 2004) *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.* London: Simon & Schuster.
4. Dixon, M., Adamson, Brent. (2011) *The Challenger Sale. How to Take Control of the Customer Conversation.* New York: Portfolio Penguin.
5. Kline, N. (1999) *Time to Think – Listening to Ignite the Human Mind.* London: Cassell Illustrated.
6. Luft, J. Ingham, H. (1955)*The Johari window, a graphic model of interpersonal awareness.Proceedings of the western training laboratory in group development. Los Angeles: UCLA.*
7. McNiff, J. (2010) *Action Research for Professional Development.* Dorset: September.
8. Morgen, S D. (2009) *Dirty Little Secrets – Why Buyers Can't Buy and Sellers Can't Sell, and What You Can Do About It.* Austin: Morgen.

Webology, Volume 18, Number 1, 2021
ISSN: 1735-188X
DOI: 10.29121/WEB/V18I1/37

9. Squire, P. (2009) *How can a 'Client-Centric Values' Approach to Selling Lead to the Co-Creation of a New Global Selling Mindset?* Unpublished Doctorate of Professional Studies Middlesex University.

10. Woodward, C. (2013) 'Sustainable Success'. *Business Voice - The CBI Magazine*http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/2492898/business_voice_november_december_2013.pdf[Accessed 15 March2014]

Tutor comments:
A well-written, well-structured report. A particular strength of the assignment is the synthesise of your research findings with your reading. In places you could have signposted more explicitly the use of reflection. More collaboration with others to evaluate your findings and improvements could have been part of the research design. The report could have considered the implications of your changes for the wider context from the customer perspective although the impact on the organisation was well considered. Further changes to your practice have been considered. Further action research projects coming out of this one could have also been explored. Overall a good application of action research.